

NICER TO STAY IN BED

A NOVEL



by
JOHN PADDY CARSTAIRS

53rd Thousand



ABRIDGED EDITION

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CHAPTER ONE

"OH MY GOODNESS!" SHOUTED PODGY NURSE MORGAN, RUSHING INTO the Nurses' Mess Room. "Whatever do you think?" She was out of breath, and her large bosom jellied as excitedly she closed the door and ran to the group in the easy chairs.

"I know—don't tell me," answered Nurse Grant, the Canadian, "there really is a Santa Claus!"

"The Nurses' Association have declared a three-day holiday!" suggested blonde Nurse Charteris, looking up from a book.

"Stupid!" said Nurse Morgan, and in a torrential rush continued: "It's amazing, absolutely wonderful. I can hardly believe it, indeed. She's coming here. Incog—whatever it is; you know—in disguise, I mean. Tonight; and she'll be in Room Two—though, of course, we're not to call her that. It's truly wonderful—I've always wanted to see her—she's my favourite!"

"What are you talking about, kiddie?" Nurse Logan asked plump Morgan. Logan was dark and big-eyed, and all the nurses were 'kiddie' to Ella Logan. Ella was also their confidante. Kind-eyed Ella.

"Who's here?" asked Charteris.

"I'm telling you!" continued Morgan, her chubby, gleaming face lit up with pleasure, her beady little eyes dancing behind the steel-rimmed spectacles.

"You're taking a ruddy long time about it!" said Margie Trimmings.

"Lutina Bell—the Lutina Bell!" gasped out Nurse Morgan.

"What—the film star?"

"But of course, the film star!"

There was immediate interest. Nurse Charteris put down her book and took off her tortoise-shelled glasses. Without them she was very attractive; green-eyed, clear-skinned, fair. Margie Trimmings, the night nurse, stopped dabbing the stopper of a bottle of Yardley's lavender water under her arms. Ella stood up, and Nurse Grant's gum-chewing noises ceased. Daphne Short's mouth opened.

"Who says so?"

"When?"

"What's she in for?"

Nurse Morgan smiled happily and breathed more easily. It was nice to be the bearer of such thrilling news. It was pleasant to be the centre of attraction in the Mess Room. That Canadian made the girls laugh most of the time, and Ella ruled the roost, and Margie Trimmings was the envy of most, so that it didn't leave many *important* positions for the rotund Morgan. Now they were all positively *hanging* on her words. She was important now, if only for a brief moment.

"It's a joke!"

"She's not coming here—she's just going to start a new picture."

"Why, she only got off the boat a few days ago!"

"It's true, I tell you," persisted Morgan. "Haven't I just been told to get Room Two ready? It's for Miss Bell—though she's to be called Miss Smith. It's all very hush-hush. She needs a rest."

"What kind of crap are you giving us?" Nurse Grant asked suspiciously. "I just read in one of those lousy film magazines of yours that she starts work at the Denham Studios on a big film."

"That's right," added Margie Trimmings. "Why should she travel all the way from Hollywood to come into an English hospital?"

"Yeah—come to that why didn't she go to a big nursing-home—one of those classy joints?" added Grant.

"Because of secrecy!" Morgan told them.

"Aw, stuff it!" said Grant. The other nurses, too, were beginning to doubt; Morgan looked a bit crestfallen, but, in thinking it all over again quickly in her mind, she revived herself with enthusiasm. "But it's the truth I'm telling you. She will be here at once. She is very tired and exhausted, and is to have a complete rest before her English film—that's what I was told. And she will be in Two. And it's Miss Smith that she is now, till she is well. All very hush-hush!" added Morgan.

"Sa-ay, if this is on the level——" Grant began.

"Of course it is, and, Nurse Logan, you are to see Matron right away—there's also a patient for Room Five—appendix—a Miss Stewart—we are going to be busy. Isn't it exciting?" said Morgan. She hurried out, her broad behind wagging as she went. Happily, she burst into 'Brightest and Best of the Sons of the Morning'. Her voice echoed along the corridor, high, piercing.

"I wonder why Lutina didn't go to the London Clinic," mused Grant.

"Maybe for the same reason as that Leftcart-Spratling in Six," replied Trimmings mysteriously.

"What do you mean, kiddie?" Ella Logan asked.

"Don't tell me a smart, rich gal like that wouldn't go to Carnarvon's or the Elizabeth Fulcher if she had a clear conscience."

"Oh, don't talk rot, Nurse!"

"Well, why come to us? We're a hospital with a seven-room private ward. Why come here?—forty miles from London—that's what I want to know!" said Trimmings.

"Forget it, kiddie!" said Ella. "The air's good down here!"

"The air's all right in London," replied Trimmings.

"Well," said Ella, "I've got to see Matron. Hook me up, kiddie, will you?" she asked Grant. "Just fancy Lutina Bell coming here! She was ever so good in *Drifting Sands*—did you see it?"

"Yes—not half bad," said Nurse Short. She was a junior probationer and was very shy and did not very often offer any conversation, though at home she was very chatty. She hadn't been at the hospital very long. She would ease up in time. It was all rather astonishing at first, and much bigger and much more down-to-earth than one realized . . . not a bit as one expected. Sort of breathtaking.

"She'll probably look awful in reality," added Trimmings, "with all those false eyelashes off!"

"She's got a sweet face," Ella replied. "Now, Kiddie, do be off with you. I must fly, too."

"Well," said Trimmings, half stifling a yawn, "I'd better go, if you say so. I can't exactly say I'm thrilled at this crop of patients—old bald-headed Gidney in One; Mrs. Draybridge in Four and the Society bitch in Six."

"Not forgetting God's gift to the Song Writers in Three!"

"Oh, him!" said Trimmings, sarcastically; but she had omitted him purposely.

"God's gift to Charteris, you mean!" said Grant, the Canadian.

"What's that? Don't tell me he's given our Evelyn a big build-up?" Trimmings inquired.

Charteris blushed and didn't answer; Mike Mahoon was not her idea of a romantic interlude. She pulled her glasses away from her nose and looked away.

"You betcha!" Grant told Trimmings. "I was taking the pan out of Mrs. Draybridge's room, and I heard him give Charteris the old business. You know: 'Gee, kid, but I could go for you!'"

Trimmings looked a little put out, but laughed.

"He's a pain in the neck!" Charteris said. She poked her spectacles back on to the bridge of her nose and pretended to read.

"He's a pain in the——"

"All right, kiddie!" Ella Logan cut in quickly. "Do hurry, Nurse," she turned to Trimmings. "Sister'll be along in a minute."

"Oh, all right," said Trimmings, "but the way she crepe-soles down the corridors makes me sick! You lucky devils—I wish I was off tonight! There's a dance on at the Majestic, and I wish I were there."

"Good God, you've had all day off, Nurse!" Ella Logan replied

"I've got to sleep—haven't I?" Trimmings asked.

"Not from what I hear!" answered Grant with a grin.

"Oh, bottoms!" said Trimmings, as she started towards the door.

"Don't forget, Nurse Charteris sends her love to Mahoon!" Grant shouted out after her, Charteris took no notice.

Trimmings walked along the corridor and took the Nurses' lift to the Private Ward Wing. She frowned as she walked. It wasn't that she was annoyed at Mike Mahoon's apparent infidelity—she was too hard-boiled to believe a word the little rat said to her, but she did think she was stringing him along nicely. If he was showing any sign of interest in any other nurse then she, Margie Trimmings, was disappointing herself. Mike was one of the best song writers in the country. In Mike's opinion he was *the* best. Certainly he had plenty of money, and you could do anything in the world with money. Money! Dresses and perfumes and drinks and good times. There was nothing like a good time, mused Margie as the lift approached the Private Ward. It was the only thing that mattered. She'd have to put the pressure on Mike. Just a wee bit. Just a little added attraction as it were. . . .

She opened the lift gates and walked down past the bathrooms and lavatories on one side of her and the kitchen on the other to the two semi-private wards. One, Room A, was for men and had four beds in it; the other, Room B, for women patients, also had four beds. There was a good-natured journalist in the men's ward, but for the rest the patients were pretty dreary, thought Margie. She passed the Sister's room where she was stationed during the night and continued on into the Private Ward. There were seven private rooms in this wing. They cost the patient seven guineas a week. Seven guineas was quite a tidy bit of money. Not to be sneezed at. You could do a lot with seven guineas. There was a pretty little number Margie had seen in the windows of the big store on the sea-front; it was pale blue tulle—and would suit her down to the ground. That would make Joe Edwards on the pier foam at the mouth. It would make Mike Mahoon do just that too! She'd slip it on for him one night very late when the coast was clear—and just walk in and watch his expression. That would make him gape all right. Margie Trimmings grinned but almost at

once let the grin drop away—she suddenly realized that she hadn't got the dress—that she hadn't got the seven guineas. She thought about this, becoming bad-tempered as she did so. H'm! The only thing to do was to get the seven guineas. Money! That was the only thing that mattered. Money gave you a good time.

She looked in, after a perfunctory tap, on Mr. Gidney. He was peacefully reading, and he bade her "Good evening" very pleasantly. Margie nodded and went out, after a quick "All right?" without waiting for his reply. He was a bald-headed old bore, thought Margie, though indeed he tried to be very little trouble to the nurses. He was in for a nephrectomy and was now recovering and had another four weeks to go.

Margie passed the next room, reserved for Lutina Bell, the film star, and purposely leaving Room Three, where Mike was installed, she went along the passage to Room Six, and banged loudly on the door. She was delighted that the Lady Cynthia Leftcart-Spratling was asleep—or rather, had been asleep until Margie had awakened her. The red-headed, white-faced Society girl looked annoyed. "Oh, what a bore you are, Nurse," she said, "I was fast asleep!"

"I am sorry," said Trimmings. "How's the throat?"

"Ruddy awful," replied Cynthia. "I thought tonsils was easy."

"Maybe it's the life you lead!" said Trimmings gaily.

"Oh, poo to you!" said Cynthia. "Get me a brandy!"

"You wait till you're out of here!" Trimmings said unkindly, and walked out.

Bitch! Bitch! Bitch! thought Cynthia, and banged at her pillow in a fury.

Next, Margie put her head round the door to look at Mrs. Draybridge. She was lying staring at the ceiling, just as she had done for weeks now. Her eyes moved to Margie, and a faint look of greeting appeared in them, and then they moved slowly back to the ceiling. Silly old hag! thought Margie. Well, she's all right; I'll be back to see her in a minute. She went out and tapped at Mike's door.

"Come in, Babe!" Mike Mahoon said.

Margie Trimmings smiled sweetly, showing a pleasing row of her own teeth, and entered, with the smile in position.

"Hallo!—Aw, gee, kid, but you're beautiful!" Mike told her. "Am I glad to see you, kid!" In his silk pyjamas and with a bright breast pocket-handkerchief, he looked affluent.

"Have you missed me all day?" Margie inquired.

"Lissen, sweetheart, I jes' wait for night-time!" Mike replied. He was short, bald, and he had a large jaw. He was about as Irish as a haggis. He looked adoringly at Nurse Trimmings. "Could I go for you," he said. "Sure I missed you! I jes' wait for night-time," he repeated. Then, snapping his fingers, he said quickly: "Say, honey, that ain't bad, is it? I'll write it for you. It ain't bad. It's an idea——"

"What?"

"What—why that—I jes' wait for night-time—it's a swell idea for a song.—Hey, be a darlin', will you, and gimme some of that paper on that table? That's fine. Gee—you smell good. I jes' wait for night-time—yeah, yeah. . . ."

CHAPTER TWO

MIRANDA STEWART, THE NEW PATIENT WHO WAS GOING INTO PRIVATE WARD, Room Five, would have been very surprised to know that she was not the last person to report to the hospital that evening. The authorities had requested her to be in by six in the evening, and Miranda had frankly rebelled at that. After all, the operation was not until noon the next day. Pure red tape—that's all it was. Contrary to her parents' wishes Miranda telephoned to say she could not possibly arrive until after dinner. The authorities told her it was most irregular, but, nevertheless, Miranda had her way. Not that she was usually 'difficult', in fact rather the reverse. Miranda, if anything, was, perhaps, too docile, her fault being that she was an only child. Her parents were 'nice', and, as was often the case, only daughters with nice parents could become problematical. Miranda would have been extremely surprised to learn that someone was arriving later than she, and even more staggered if she had known it was the film star, Lutina Bell. Miranda liked going to the pictures, and she always went to the Lutina Bell productions. Even Daddy knew that Lutina Bell was a film star and not a brand of face-cream. Miranda would have been furious had she known that the authorities had agreed to Lutina Bell arriving at the hospital well after midnight, but if one earns fifty thousand pounds a year it ought to get one some privileges.

Miranda's father was driving the Ford Prefect, and quite soon they could see the outline of the hospital, a two-storeyed building, as it lay straight ahead, silhouetted in the moonlight.

"Here we are!" said her father, very brightly. Daddy usually succeeded in being trite on all tremulous occasions.

It looks more like an American prison than a hospital, Miranda thought. There were big gates and a drive in, and a small house on the left (where, in any gangster film, there'd be a large searchlight and a machine-gun and lots of tough-looking cops). Miranda sighed as she continued to sum up the place. Her father pretended that he had not heard that very audible murmur. Poor girl! It was natural that she was very nervous, but then, so was he. His wife, Amelia, Miranda's mother, however, had become so acutely 'jittery', as Miranda had termed it, that they gave her two aspirin tablets and packed her, white-faced, off to bed, and it wasn't yet nine o'clock. Thus, none of the Stewarts were in especially fine fettle. It wasn't a difficult operation—only an appendix, and purely a precaution—but, oh well! When one had an only child, and that child was Miranda, twenty-two, lovely and clever . . . well, he mustn't show that he was worrying! He promptly started to hum 'Soldiers of the Queen'. It brought Miranda out of her reverie.

They were through the gates now, and no one stopped them, and they continued up the drive to the main entrance.

The place, Miranda immediately thought, had a gaol-like appearance from every angle. Now that they were actually there, it seemed very cold and forbidding.

They reached the main entrance. A porter, very smart and wearing a row of shining medals, came out and helped her out of the car and took possession of the two Revelation suit-cases neatly marked with M.S. on the right-hand corner. She heard him saying, pleasantly, "Miss Miranda Stewart. This way, madam. We're expecting you!" Of course they were, thought Miranda. It would have been quite

inefficient if they hadn't been! And yet, too, if they had made a mistake, and the family doctor, Thumpson-White, had forgotten to book the room and arrange for the operation, she could have used that as a great excuse not to go through with it. Not to go to Canada—not to bother about anything. But there she was trudging down a long, brightly lit, parquet-floored corridor, with the porter ahead and father, slightly awed but feigning admirable casualness, and now that they were 'in the thick of it' he had stopped that infernal song. Christmas! why did I agree to all this, and with Canada so near—a Canada I may never see. Suppose—I wonder if I ought to have made a will?

"We'll take the lift."

Awaiting the arrival of Miranda Stewart and Lutina Bell, Margie Trimmings sat at a desk in the corridor of the Private Ward with her black, scarlet-lined coat around her. Idly she thought retrospectively about her day. It had been quite a satisfactory one. She had gone off duty at six in the morning, had a bath, changed and had her 'dinner' at the Nurses' Lodge at seven-thirty in the morning. She read the papers and went for a walk which culminated in coffee and buns with a girl friend in the Cake-House in the High Street. They shopped until noon, then she met Joe, one of her current boy-friends, who took her to an early lunch and the pictures, where they tried a little 'handy-and-footy' in the back row of the one-and-threes. She was back at the hospital at three-thirty, and was in bed asleep by three-thirty seven, and she slept soundly despite the shrill cries of her more energetic colleagues on the nearby recreational field until her alarm went off at eight.

Yes, mused Margie, it wasn't a bad day, but it wasn't quite the 'pairfect' day. There wasn't a single motor drive, an evening gown or a glass of champagne in it. Margie sighed. Well, Mike Mahoon wouldn't be in hospital much longer, and she certainly had put the pressure on; she'd taken quite a risk to let him kiss her, especially with so many people about—the day and night staff overlapped by half an hour, and from the way he reacted it was obvious that he could hardly wait to take her out properly, perhaps in London. H'm! It hadn't been an exciting kiss—for her. He wasn't the ideal man, but it was surprising just how much you could stomach when you wanted other things arising out of a little acquiescence—and, too, she had slipped back into first place again. That Charteris girl didn't fool Margie Trimmings, she was far too cool—those willowy blondes with their pale eyes and their 'I'd-rather-read-a-book' look were the hot ones. The ones you had to watch . . . the designing hussies. . . .

Nurse Trimmings sighed and glanced at the Patients' Book, then glanced at her book. She frowned. Where was this Miss Stewart, and, for that matter, when would Lutina appear? She took no notice of her Junior, who had raced up the corridor still trying to put on her belt, full of profuse apologies. The day nurses were still 'on', and chatted garrulously as they made some coffee in the Patients' kitchen. There were footsteps along the corridor, then the swing doors were opened by the porter, and Trimmings looked up to see Miss Stewart and an elderly man with her—good-looking in an apologetic way. The girl obviously a 'lady'. Margie was contemptuous of all 'ladies' save those with titles, and those she hated for their class superiority, but envied for their positions.

"Good evening—this is Miss Stewart?"

"Yes, that's right."

"We were expecting you——"

(What, again! thought Miranda.)

"—at eight!" continued Nurse Trimmings.

"I'm so sorry—but my wife—she's not used to this sort of thing—the worry of it all—well, you know. We had to attend to her, and that made us late," Mr. Stewart explained.

"Yes, of course. Room Four. Will you come this way?"

They followed her along the corridor past the two semi-private wards and along the corridor with doors leading off to private rooms.

They entered a neat, pleasant room, with a chest of drawers and mirror. There were also a small table and an easy chair, two ordinary chairs and a large clothes' cupboard. An electric fire and central heating warmed the room. Flowers from her mother were already there to greet Miranda. It was all rather impersonal, but not half as bad as she had pictured it. And, besides, being in a Private Ward made a big difference.

Nurse Trimmings had obtained a good glimpse of her new patient and noted with annoyance the natural fair hair, the big, baby-blue eyes and the soft mouth. Another of those 'casual' ones! she thought, and decided there and then she was not going to like Miss Stewart. It was, perhaps, a feminine trait more especially pronounced in Margie that she mentally made up her mind to dislike any woman as attractive as herself. Expensive shoes and small feet, thought Margie, bet she's had it soft. A scream her Ma fainting. Huh! They all lived a pretty cushy life all right. A 'lady'; a positive 'lady'!

"I suppose we'd better say good-bye now, Daddy."

I suppose you'd better, thought Margie, unless you want him to tuck you up and give you a good-night kiss. She looks the sort who's afraid of the dark and wants a night-light. The Trimmings upper-lip curled up very faintly.

"Well, my dear, I'll—er—see you tomorrow. What time can I come, Nurse?" the father turned to her.

"I understand the operation is at noon. It would be better to wait till the evening. It may take a little time, and afterwards we give the patients something to make them sleep once they've come out of the anæsthetic. If you rang the hospital at twelve-thirty . . ." she suggested.

"Yes, of course. Very good. Well, my dear, good-bye, and—er—good luck!"

Mr. Stewart turned, and, after a brief pause at the door, went off down the corridor whistling the inevitable 'Soldiers of the Queen'.

Trimmins turned down the bedclothes and thumped the pillow as Miranda put one of her suit-cases on the chair and began to open it. "You'd better get undressed now, please," she said.

"Why?" Miranda inquired, with a hint of pugnaciousness. No, she didn't like her nurse at all—anyway, perhaps she wasn't here during the daytime. "It's only nine o'clock, and——"

"You have to be weighed," said Nurse Trimmings.

"Must I?"

"Yes, of course."

"Tonight?"

"Yes—we're very busy in the morning. Besides, it's customary."

"Oh, all right. But I don't feel like bed yet."

A faint smile illumined the supercilious face of Nurse Trimmings.

"This is a hospital, and it is usual for everyone to be in bed by eight-thirty. Lights are out at nine-thirty in the big wards——"

"That's why I engaged a private room!" flashed Miranda, on the verge of losing her temper.

Engaged! thought Margie. What does she think this is—the Hotel de la Splosh?

Miranda began to put some of her clothes into the chest of drawers.

"I'll probably read till about eleven," she continued.

"I'll come back for you in about ten minutes," said Margie, curtly.

"Very well."

Miranda waited until she had gone, and then sat despondently on the edge of the bed. Oh, Crippen! It was just like being back at school. Rules and regulations. And treating the patients as if they were prisoners. Cell No. 5 she was in. Gosh, after all, she wasn't ill yet. They could insist on all that lights-out stuff after noon tomorrow, when she would be ill, and be only too glad for all that stuff. And now, oh, everything was rotten, and she hated the nurse, and the hospital was so depressing. And she'd have to sleep in a strange bed and in a new room, and that always sort of unnerved her. Blast! Why *did* she decide to go through with this wretched operation? It obviously wouldn't benefit her at all—it was only a safety measure because she was going abroad, and she was, really, quite all right. . . . She wanted to cry, but, remembering that the nurse would be back shortly, she began to undress, first selecting a pair of her most attractive pyjamas from one of the suit-cases. "I'll show her!" she murmured to herself.

When Margie returned, Miranda was sitting in the arm-chair reading a new Rose Macaulay novel. She wore a silk dressing-gown over some very transparent and expensive pyjamas. If she succeeded in shocking or annoying the nurse, that fact was not shown in the latter's face.

"This way, please," she said, impassively.

They went down the corridor and along to the lift past the swing doors. Nurse Trimmings operated this, and they went down to the ground floor. Here, along a bright corridor, past the Night Matron and a Ward Sister who were making the rounds, through a big ward, where the recumbent bodies of somnolent patients could be seen vaguely outlined in the soft firelight—the mixed, stale smell of Sanitas, oranges, ether and excretions assailing Miranda's unaccustomed nostrils—and into a small room where there were steaming bowls of instruments in sterilization. In one corner of the room were the scales. Miranda got on to the platform, and Margie adjusted the weights.

"Thank you." She noted the weight down on a chart.

They went through the ward again, and Miranda held her breath. One man was moaning in a very alarming voice.

"Is he—being attended to?" Miranda asked.

"I expect so," Nurse Trimmings replied curtly.

Callous cat! thought Miranda. They got into the elevator and were soon en route to her room again. The Junior Probationer was awaiting Nurse Trimmings at the Sister's desk.

"Nurse Trimmings, are you ready to do the dressings?"

"Yes, I'll do them now. You can find your way back, can't you, Miss Stewart?"

"Yes, thank you."

"It's down that corridor, fifth on the right. I'll be down shortly," said Margie, and went off to wash, preparatory to attending to the various dressings for the night.

Miranda got into bed and read some more of her Macaulay novel. It was a good hour before Nurse Trimmings returned.

"Hallo, still reading?" she asked. It was quite obvious that Miranda was. "Aren't you going to sleep now?" It was quite obvious that Miranda was not.

"No. I said I'd probably read till about eleven."

"Very well, but you'll have to take some medicine tonight."

"Why?"

"Because of the op. What do you usually take to cleanse yourself?"

"Oh, I see. Well, Eno's or Ex-Lax."

"I'll give you some cascara, if you don't mind."

"Oh, but—well, must I *really* have anything? I won't eat any breakfast——"

"I'm afraid you must. You see, it'll help you take the oxygen and gas better—if you're empty, I mean."

"Yes, I see."

The nurse, meanwhile, had produced three pills. She poured out some water from the decanter. Reluctantly Miranda took the pills and made a wry face.

"Can I have a lump of sugar? That was awful!"

"I'll send you a piece down right away."

"Also, could I get some coffee in about half an hour?"

What does she think this is, Margie asked herself; a blinking nightclub?

"Oh, and Nurse—Nurse—what is the name?"

"It's Nurse Trimmings."

"Nurse Trimmings?"

"Trimmins—with an 's'."

"Oh, I see. Well, Nurse, I'd also like a night-light," said Miranda.

"You see, I'm not used to a strange room, and I——"

"Very well." With a grin Nurse Margie Trimmings went out. In the corridor she laughed softly, spitefully.

"Huh!" she said, talking aloud to herself. "I *told* you so!" She went down to the desk to get on with the dressings.

It was well after midnight when Lutina Bell arrived. They brought her up on a stretcher. That certainly was a surprise. Margie had no idea she was so ill; up till now the Night Sister had volunteered no information about the famous star. But, thought Margie, as she followed the Sister and the stretcher-party into Room Two, she couldn't just be suffering from sheer physical exhaustion as much as all that. A serious-faced film executive with a very white collar and a neat blue suit was with her, and two London specialists. This was, Margie decided, getting interesting! They left Margie to undress the famous star whilst they retired to Sister's room.

Margie gazed down at the face that had thrilled the nations; again Margie smiled. You couldn't say that was a lovely face! Well, maybe it had been—maybe she was very ill. Perhaps when she was made up and prinked up a bit, thought Margie, grudgingly, she wouldn't

look too bad. Not nearly as beautiful as they made her look in films. Now what the devil was wrong with her?

Why didn't they tell her—they'd have to before the night was out. Perhaps Sister would be back in a jiffy. Gosh! This was interesting. Margie *knew* there was some funny business going on. Why had Lutina Bell come to this 'dump'? Why had——

She bent down to slip the sports coat off the film favourite, and as she did so she caught a sudden whiff of brandy. Margie's eyes widened. She glanced quickly at the door, and then hurriedly shook the patient.

"Wha's the matter? Huh? Hey, leggo o' me, will yah! Aw, cut t out!" drawled Lutina Bell.

Nurse Trimmings gasped. Jumping Jehoshaphat! Lutina Bell, the famous innocent-faced film star, was cock-eyed, paralytically, stinking drunk—a nice little touch of acute alcoholism! Gleefully Margie put the screen star to bed.

CHAPTER THREE

SIPPING OVALTINE WITH HER JUNIOR AT THREE IN THE MORNING, Nurse Trimmings blew into her cup to cool her drink.

"You look sort of pleased with yourself, Nurse," her Junior ventured to remark.

"I am! I am!" Margie replied, smiling secretly at her knowledge. Sister had confirmed it to her later. So that was the mystery! No wonder they had 'spirited' Lutina Bell to an out-of-town hospital and not taken her to a London nursing-home. Of course, Margie was, and the other nurses would be, sworn to secrecy. Gosh! What a sensation it would have made in the newspapers. To think that the child-like Lutina was a drunken souse! Boy, oh boy, what a sensation! Well, you had to admire the star—she looked positively *innocent* on the screen——

Meanwhile, in Private Room No. Two the famous film star lay fast asleep, breathing deeply, with her pretty mouth open and a snore that could be heard by Miranda Stewart in Room Five. I wish I could sleep like that, Miranda complained to herself. The newcomer (for she had heard the arrival of a new patient) certainly had no operation nerves; it made one positively envious. Miranda would have been startled had she seen Lutina.

Oddly enough, for the first two days out of New York, Lutina had impressed all the first-class passengers on board the S.S. *Magnifique* with her charm, her simplicity, her complete lack of theatrical 'streaks'—but two days was a long time, it must be admitted, at the risk of disappointing twenty million film fans, for lovely Lutina to go without a drink or two. Under dire threats from her Producers, Lutina just had to keep sober for the photographers at the New York docks. A force of seven of the C-K-L publicity department were detailed to follow and *stay with* Lutina from the moment she stepped out of the TWA 'plane at the Floyd Gibbons Field and had been 'signed' for and delivered by the four West Coast Executives who had escorted her from the Los Angeles Airport. And, somehow, *ars gratia artis*,

Lutina had remained, to the relief of the Associate Producer who had been sent with her to England, quite normal until that party given by the Cuban on the second night out. At which particularly gay *soirée* la belle Lutina had become, as one guest put it, 'slightly pixilated', and as another, less kind, 'positively plastered, old boy!' After that, Lutina decided to enjoy herself. Knowing that she had only three and a half days of unlimited fun and perfect freedom before she reached England for her film in that country, she was determined to enjoy herself, there being no nasty make-up wizards to report on those tell-tale circles that had a hiccup-like way of appearing after any indiscretion in which she might indulge.

Of course, on a picture, Lutina had to be careful, very careful. She knew, indeed, that the camera did lie, but there was a limit to that which the poor camera could do. It wasn't as big a liar as all that. Of course, with the aid of Bud Ernshaw (Dean of Make-up, as he termed himself in the trade papers) and her pet lighting expert, not to mention a number of trick head movements Lutina had learned that hid the bad angles (and, of course, any amount of shading round the jaws where the effect of too much gin and baccardi-had begun to make them just the tiniest bit flabby), the camera *could* be made to lie . . . up to a point. But one did have to be careful. And no one knew better than Lutina when she had reached saturation point. Now, away from newspapermen, at sea on the S.S. *Magnifique*, she could 'take her back hair down' and have 'one hell of a swell time' . . .

"Phooey to my British Picture!" said Lutina Bell, for she did not like the idea of doing one of her contract films at Denham, Uxbridge, England, instead of at the usual C-K-L plant in Hollywood. You see, Lutina had recently fallen in love with Jan Sebastian, who was under contract to Allegro Productions, and she did not want to be parted from the almost equally famous male star. Lutina wanted to squeeze the very last drop of romance out of this succulent affair, for, in truth, most of her loves, in a white-heat of emotion, blazed for approximately five to six weeks—the heat mostly on her side—and this idyll was a mere fortnight old. . . . It hadn't really reached its high spot, as it were. . . . Thus, Lutina was loath to leave California's sun-kissed shores.

Now, as she lay in that deep sleep, she dreamed, and as she dreamed, occasionally she would talk—not in the refined 'bastard' English accent (that was not too Mayfair for Kansas and not too American for Cheltenham), but in the slangy, racey tone that was the real Lutina Bell, who was, indeed, born Mabel Beets in Minneapolis, Minnesota—but who the hell ever heard of a film star with the name of Beets?

Mabel had reason to congratulate herself. She had, to use her own words (the sort of speech she used when she was too intoxicated to remember that 'bastard' accent), "Done good." Yes, she had 'done good' all right. Her father was an elevator man in a second-rate hotel in Minneapolis, no ambition, a liking for liquor, three children and a wife who was always grumbling. It was lucky, Mabel Beets decided, when she began to realize the importance of those moon-calf looks the boys gave her at school, that she was beautiful. It meant you had a good time. And that was, of course, the first and foremost reason for being alive; and you were put on this earth, primarily, to have a Good Time. And Mabel Beets did have a good time; Mabel saw to that herself.

When she was seventeen there wasn't a guy who was halfway

good-looking at the University who didn't think she was Tops. She had what it takes, and little Mabel knew it, thank you!

But when it came to thanking—then Gaylord Alderdyce was the only one who deserved that, she supposed. Gaylord with his Town car and three roadsters, his English-cut clothes and his father's million dollars. It didn't take little Mabel long to ensnare young Gaylord. It was, she persuaded him, his idea that she could and should be a film star. And it was, of course, Gaylord Alderdyce's two hundred and fifty dollars that was tucked in her brassiere that early morning when she entrained for Hollywood (if not Gaylord's two-fifty—then his father's!). And, of course, she'd write him. But, of course. He was, well, he was her 'sponsor'. No, *of course*, that wasn't all; he was a darling, he was quite perfect, and she'd never forget him. Well, that part of it was quite true. She couldn't very well forget how she got her start. Of course, she'd have made her way to Hollywood somehow, and if Gaylord hadn't loaned her the money then, no doubt, someone else would have obliged—and liked it. But then, she couldn't forget Gaylord, in fact she often wondered if he ever saw her on the screen, if he realized that Lutina was his little Mabel Beets. True, it was a good three years after she had first arrived in Hollywood before she got her first 'break'. And it was another two after that before she became a star; before she was 'La belle Bell'. But everything took time, of course, yes, everything. There was a technique in everything; that's why Mabel didn't want to go to England to make a film—she had had only two weeks of her allotted six with Jan Sebastian, and everything took time.

Of course, Mabel had run away from home.

Hollywood sure was a disappointment at first. The train came right into Los Angeles, and apart from a number of rather pathetic-looking palm trees in the streets in the outskirts of the town, Los Angeles wasn't such a whole lot different to Kansas or Minneapolis. It seemed awfully 'hick' to Mabel. It was large and busy and like New York, no doubt, but it hadn't got New York's greatness, least-ways that's what she figured, because she had read it in a book about Los Angeles being hick and not like New York. It was nice and sunny, but there were no studios to be seen, and there didn't seem much sign of film stars either. But she knew from her film-fan papers that Hollywood was quite a way from Los Angeles proper, so maybe she'd better take a look-see at Los Angeles before moving out to Hollywood. It was hot carrying that suit-case around, and people pushed you, and everyone seemed plenty busy and no one was at all neighbourly, except for one fresh sailor—and Mabel drew the line at gobs and marines. There was a limit to all things. After she had a sandwich at a drug store and had got talking to the boy who jerked the soda, she managed to steer the conversation around to Hollywood. It was then that the boy gave her a quick glance, noticed the suit-case and the fact that she was wearing her best dress—and, grinning, said, "Lissen, sister—if you take my advice you'll go on back home!"

That was a swell greeting! California, here I come! It was lucky Mabel was tough. She munched her ham-on-rye and asked why; though she could readily have spat in the masher's eye.

"Well, I can see you aim to try and break into the movies. Well, you're crazy to try it!" he told her. "You're a pretty kid—an' I'm not just giving you the ole line," he continued quickly, "but I see too many of 'em—too many sweet girls come into Hollywood and quit a year or two later—plenty sowed-up—an' broke!"

"Yeah. Well, mister, here's one girl who doesn't quit and who don't get sowed up. Furthermore, I gotta bank roll," Mabel told him.

"You need it," he said. "I'm not fooling you," he added. "I used to work at the drug store on the corner of Vine and Hollywood Boulevard. I seen these dames coming off the trolley bus with their suit-cases and that eager, 'Hey, I'm here and where are the movie studios?' look in their eyes. I'm telling you, sister, they've got cuties in all the shops on Hollywood Boulevard just as pretty as you. You take a tip, go home!"

Mabel finished her sandwich slowly. "Don't worry about me!" she told him, slipping off the stool and holding her hand over the counter for the check. "I can take it—and lick it!" she said. "Now, just where is this place they call Hollywood?"

"Okay, don't say I didn't warn you," the soda-mixer replied. "You'd better take a bus, give you a chance to see a bit of Wiltshire Boulevard."

He gave her elaborate instructions on how and where to catch the bus, and she thanked him casually, but went out with bumping heart. She sat on top of the bus, but didn't think much of Wiltshire Boulevard except it was plenty wide and it seemed that there was one hell of a lot of cars on it. There were more palm trees and lots of cheap homes, and it was still scorching hot and she must remember to get some sun glasses. Well, now she was in Hollywood, at least, she must be, because she saw a street called Gower Street and some large buildings with 'Columbia Pictures' on the outside, and the conductor came up the stairs and shouted "Vine and Sunset, this is you, miss!" So she got off the bus on the corner, and it was certainly quite a busy corner, but not much sign of any more studios or film actors or anything, so she took a chance and asked a man if this was Hollywood, and he laughed and said, "Well, it always has been!" and walked on.

Luckily there was one of those big Drive-In cafés, so she went to get a 'coke' there and sort herself out, because, if this was Hollywood, then Hollywood sure was a bust.

Yep, it was Hollywood all right!—so the girl who served her said. She was a pretty little thing, the fluffy would-you-protect-me type that some men went for. She gave Mabel the same sort of searching look that the boy in the down-town drug store had given her, and said: "Come to try your luck in the movies?" Mabel nodded. The girl made a grimace. "So did I," she said, "close on two years ago now."

"Didn't you have any luck?" Mabel asked.

"Look at me—I'm not working here because I like it!" the girl replied. "The dice are loaded against you, take my word for it," she added. Mabel thought: this seems a frame-up. They don't seem to take to strangers here.

"I ain't jealous of you, kid," the girl added, as if reading Mabel's thoughts. "My name's Marie-Louise. I'm telling you for your own good. You got any folks?"

"My ma and pa are alive, sure."

"Well, you send 'em a wire, get some dough and go on back while the going's good," Marie-Louise said. "What's your name, anyway?"

"Mabel Beets. Don't you think I'll get in the movies?"

"Listen, Mabel. I've been here two years, and I ain't even seen the inside of a studio," Marie-Louise told her.

"Did you try?"

"Did I try? Say, listen to her!" Marie-Louise replied, addressing the gods above. "I've got talent. No kidding, real talent, but I couldn't get in. 'Register with Central Casting'," she said, mimicking the studio officials, "and try and register—with all those thousands on their books—and if you do get on—you get one call in five years. Hollywood—nuts to Hollywood!—I wouldn't mind," she added, "if I hadn't got talent, but I've got talent. Can you sing and hoof?" she demanded, almost aggressively.

"Well, not professionally, but——"

"There you are!" Marie-Louise interrupted. "Well, I can, and good too. An' I been here two years and I still ain't worked."

"Are you still—er—trying, then?" Mabel asked.

"You bet I am," came the quick reply. "If I got one day's extra work I'd quit this dump—just like that!" She snapped her fingers to express the speed in which she would depart from the Drive-In Café.

"Gimme another coke, will you, Louise," said Mabel, and thought, 'Mabel Beets—you've got to figure this out!'

Hollywood Boulevard stretches straight for some miles, connecting up the suburbs of Los Angeles and the wealthy residential section of Beverly Hills. It is, perhaps, the most famous street in the world. It is, thought Mabel, quite one of the most disappointing. Wide, certainly, with trolley cars running down it and a number of movie-houses, far too many Five-and-Ten-Cent Stores and drug stores on all the block corners. There were no palm trees, no film studios, no glamour, except in the shops and cafés. Therein, as assistants and waitresses, were lovely girls of all shapes, sorts and sizes—would-be stars. The film studios were not on the Boulevard; in fact, apart from Columbia, the others in Hollywood were not even in walking distance; certainly not on a hot day.

All this and more Mabel had gleaned from her newly found friend, Marie-Louise. It was at Marie-Louise's suggestion that she walked up Vine Street and turned left on the celebrated Boulevard and made for Wilcox Avenue. There was a small hotel there called the 'Carlisle'. You could get a room and shower for a buck and a half. It was a putty-coloured stucco, oblong-shaped building of two storeys, with a large electric sign in which several of the light bulbs were missing, perched almost top-heavily on the roof. In the lounge were a number of well-worn sofas; and parched, potted palms hid cracks in the walls. The reception desk was managed by a perpetually smiling old-time actor, Dusty, who was fortunate in obtaining a permanent job. Dusty could be a good friend when you were so flat you couldn't find a nickel to pay for a shake down. Dusty often slipped you the key to an empty apartment for the night, when the Boss had gone to bed—so long as you were out by morning, early, before the Boss was up.

When Mabel asked for a room, Dusty quickly peered over the reception desk to see if she had a suit-case. Too many girls came into the Carlisle without any luggage; you had to have some luggage to get in, even at the Carlisle. And the Carlisle reached a new low as a hotel. There were a number of people sitting and standing about

in the lobby, that day when Mabel walked in. She was to learn that there were always people hanging about there; some had even got the film make-up on; actors and actresses hopefully awaiting a call. Some of them put on make-up to go out for lunch in the hope that they could make some folks believe they were working, though, of course, it took Mabel quite a bit of time to figure that one out. But out-of-work actors weren't the only people who stayed at the Carlisle; there were others, like Lou Murtagh. He was a writer. A continuity writer, to be more exact. You see, you had to specialize in Hollywood. Everyone was a Specialist. Continuity writing, which was a form of scenario work, was Lou's speciality. Right now he was having a bad time. It seemed that Lou had been over to visit his Supervisor's wife when his Supervisor was previewing a picture down at San Diego, but his Supervisor came home early. Lou was no longer working at that studio. In a way he was quite a specialist at this. He was in the lobby when Mabel signed the hotel register. He was on the 'phone to her five minutes later, introducing himself and calling her 'Miss Beets', and suggesting that he could show her around, that he knew the ropes and could be of some assistance to her. Mabel knew the type, but she had another advantage; Lou didn't know Mabel. Lou, paying for lunch at the counter place across the street and thinking he was getting to first base, never so far as went in to bat, but Lou paid up all right, just as long as Mabel wished it. He was soon nuts about her. Mabel saw to that.

Marie-Louise came and visited her at the Carlisle, and talked Dusty into giving Mabel special weekly rates at the hotel, and she explained just how Mabel got to the various studios and the names of one or two boys in the Casting Department. It seemed that the first thing a girl did was to hook a guy with a car. There was a lot for Mabel to learn about Hollywood.

Sure, it was a pretty nice place if you were a millionaire with a large estate at Pasadena and a beach house at Malibu. It was a pretty nice place if you were a star with a Rolls-Royce car, a fat film contract and a mansion in Bel-air. It was even a pretty nice place if you were just a hobo, a tramp, a bum. You could eat for next to nothing in Hollywood—and the climate was nice if you had to be out in it all the time—and it was pretty 'easy' in Hollywood, even for a beggar. But for a girl who had ambition; for a girl who didn't want to be just a gorgeous waitress, for a girl who wanted to be a film star, Hollywood was hell. Absolute hell.

Gaylord Alderdyce's money, or rather his father's money, didn't last very long, even with people like the out-of-work writer Lou Murtagh ("I get two-fifty a week when I'm working, honest! I'm an expert!"), buying a lot of meal tickets. There was the rent at the hotel and bus fares and a swim-suit and slacks and, of course, new clothes—for the stuff she wore in Minneapolis was okay—in Minneapolis! And there was a little matter of manicures and hair-permanents each week to go out to the studios; for one had to look presentable, otherwise one would never get a job in the lousy studios. It all seemed to eat the money away.

And, even as Marie-Louise had warned her, it seemed well-nigh impossible to get one's nose into the studios. Hollywood had seen all the pretty women it ever wanted to see. You had to be a mighty big hit in a New York stage production or a famous foreigner or a champion roller-skater—in fact, anything except a pretty girl who wanted

to act in pictures—before they'd look at you. There was one exception to this rule. You might get a lucky 'break'. Or you might get 'in' with the higher-ups. And, Mabel told herself in one retrospective mood, as she lay in bed at the Carlisle thinking it was time she sent Ma a letter to say where she was (and to see if Ma could scrounge her a few dollars to keep going), to wait for a lucky 'break' meant you might have to wait ages. It was, then, a matter of getting in with the higher-ups. And that required a certain amount of campaign planning. One thing was certain, Hollywood certainly wasn't going to lick Mabel Beets.

CHAPTER FOUR

MR. MURTAGH SUGGESTED THE NAME-CHANGE. HE TOLD HER NO film star could attract a public if she called herself 'Beets'. They spent a whole afternoon on the beach at Santa Monica trying to find the right one.

"What the hell? When I get there," Mabel said, "they'll call me something simple—like Garbo, Dietrich or Shearer."

"Nothing like going right to the top, Baby!" was Lou's comment. But then, Lou didn't know Mabel's will power. Years later, when he was working on space as a reporter on a cheap daily in down-town L.A., he had reason to remember Mabel's prophecy. She became as great as Loy and Durbin—and they called her 'Bell'—just 'Bell' Mabel got what she wanted because she had determination and because she wanted it so much. Of course, her success was a fluke, if you didn't count scheming and campaigning and the wiles of Mabel Beets. Just luck, of course, that she met Anatole de Bussy.

When things were getting really tough and Lou began pawning his fraternity pin and his watch with the diamond works, one morning as they went on the Boulevard to breakfast, striding ahead of them with a head of hair of a third-rate musician and the waist of a Fifth Avenue mannequin, was a tall young man wearing a loud English check coat, salmon-coloured trousers and sandals. He also carried a rolled umbrella. The first rolled umbrella Hollywood had seen used for sartorial smartness. Even among the kaleidoscopic oddities of Hollywood, this apparition was striking.

"Get that, ahead!" said Mabel.

"Yeah—I know. It—he's a screwy foreign writer—writes those frothy dishes—all wisecrack an' no guts," Lou explained. "Clever son-of-a-bitch, though—always working, and it isn't the clothes—he's just a Screw-Ball."

"What's his name?"

"Anatole de Bussy—worse than Beets, I'd say!"

"If you know him—why don't you introduce him?"

"I'm a religious man, but I don't do as the Scriptures say and lay down my girl-friend for any Hollywood snake in the grass," said Lou quickly.

"Funds are getting awful low," remarked Mabel.

"Hey—what are you giving me?"

"Skip it—look, he's turning in to the Derby."

"Always has breakfast there—walks in from Laurel Canyon. I tell you he's daffy. Come on, honey, let's eat."

The next morning when Lou awoke, he found that Mabel had already gone out for breakfast. He knew just where to find her. Mabel and Anatole de Bussy were breakfasting *à deux* at the Hollywood Derby. Mabel grinned and waved to Lou as he entered.

She lunched with Anatole at the Lamaze and at the studio the following day. She dined with him at the Cocoanut Grove, and Glaubspiel, the producer, joined them. She started work as a lady's maid in *Tulips for Two* the following Monday. It was a small part, and she was petrified, but somehow she managed to say the one line: "Madame knows what Frenchmen are!" without being sick on the set. But she got to the Women's only just in time.

Three days later she left the Carlisle and moved to Beverly Hills. She was given a contract by Glaubspiel a month later, and made a success in a dance-hostess story, playing the innocent girl who thought men really wanted to dance. Anatole took her to all the literary parties and then Glaubspiel took her to all the important ones. She preferred the literary ones; she soon learned that movie stars were as brilliant as their dialogue writers; that, off the screen, with no direction and no one to put smart phrases into their mouths, most of the film favourites were painfully foolish, amazingly conceited, utterly selfish. She didn't want to lose Tollie de Bussy—but Anatole didn't want to lose his writing contract, and Glaubspiel had, as it were, first option on her services.

Somehow the noise and the strangeness of the studios, after the first few days, did not worry her. She learned the technique in no time: she 'took' direction obediently until she was sure of herself. She learned the value of keeping silent until she had something worth while to say or a chance of repeating a wise-crack that one of her scenario-writers had made privately to her. She was a star within six months. She was a big star within two years. She conveniently 'forgot' Lou, but was sweet to him if she ever saw him, which was seldom. She had no compunction in cutting Marie-Louise, and she looked politely blank, but smiled graciously, when any of the out-of-works from the Carlisle, taking courage in both hands, called out to her "Hallo" at Pre-views. She imported a Rolls-Bentley and a Swiss maid; she wore her evening dresses once and her monogrammed undies twice before discarding them for ever, and then, when fame was positively entirely hers, she fell off the water waggon and fell deeply into the sticky mess of Hollywood alcoholism.

By now Lutina had swung over from Glaubspiel to C-K-L, who offered her a straight five-year contract without options. 'Bell' pictures sold, people paid to see Lutina. Gaylord Alderdycé wrote from Minneapolis saying he was sure she was Mabel Beets, and would she marry him. The letter, forwarded to her bungalow on the studio lot as being one of the few possibly genuine ones and not just fan mail, was unanswered by her. She continued to have violent *affaires* with Art Directors, Writers and Costume Designers because they were more intelligent than male stars or hearty football players turned Assistant Directors. And, although they were lousy lovers, they fed her tongue and mind with a pseudo-smartness that passed, in the city of celluloid, for brilliance. And in between pictures you got stinking drunk.

Whether bored by her clever friends, whether for contrast, whether

because sexually she had never been satisfied by the mental group, whether befuddled by alcohol, Lutina Bell, finally, at the height of her career, fell for an actor—Jan Sebastian. It was for this reason that C-K-L decided the best thing that Lutina could do at that time was a film in England, and they could not 'see' Jan Sebastian in the leading male role. Tears, rows, threats of tearing up her contract. Tantrums, hysteria, foul language, drunken evenings and vase-throwing, all failed to make the C-K-L producers change their plans, and Lutina realized she was beaten; there comes a time when one finally says "O.K. I'll go quiet!", and thus she went—with the tumult and the shouting; the pomp and circumstance; the mass hysteria of the New York mob. The wise ones around Broadway and Beverly's Strip said "Watch Bell—she's no sucker—she'll make the movie of her career in England and then make C-K-L give her a new contract". That's what the wise ones said. The night after the *Magnifique* left New York, Lutina took to the bottle. Now, with her English film postponed a week, she lay in an out-of-London hospital, under the *nom-de-guerre* of Smith, trying to snap out of a hell of a hang-over.

CHAPTER FIVE

NURSE TRIMMINS WENT ROUND THE PRIVATE WARD AGAIN JUST BEFORE dawn. In 'A'—the men's ward—Duffy, the bald-headed reporter, lay with his head over the bed and a cherubic grin on his face. Margie managed to prop him back without disturbing him, and then proceeded down the corridor to the private rooms. With the help of her Junior she unlaced Mr. Gidney's body straps and applied new gauze and cotton wool to his wound, which was healing up nicely. Mr. Gidney was one of those docile patients that made you want to scream. She frowned, as she inevitably did when annoyed, but, going into Room Two, was excited into a good humour. Lutina Bell lay with a petulant expression on her face, her night-dress up to her thigh and her bedclothes on the floor. She occasionally talked to herself. Margie readjusted the night-dress and replaced the bedclothes. Lutina awoke.

"Io!" she said. Margie made soothing Nurse-noises.

"Hey, gimme a high-ball, will you?" Lutina requested.

Margie poured out a glass of water and held Lutina's back as she drank in great sob-like gulps.

"Gee, that's good; that's the real MacCoy! Thanks, kid!" said Lutina, and was almost asleep again before Margie could lower her to the pillow. She still smelt horribly of drink. Margie went out, smirking to herself.

Mike, in Room Three, was fast asleep, and there was nothing that had to be done for him, and she was glad to tip-toe out of his room. She wanted to finish the last chapter of a rather hot book a boy had lent her, and Mike would be bound to start his funny business if she had aroused him.

She might have guessed that Mrs. Draybridge would be awake! The old hag lay with her eyes open gazing up at the sky as if pleading

with the Lord to arrange for Gabriel and a company of hefty angels to lift her to the celestial heavens. Bah! People had no guts. There was nothing wrong with Mrs. Draybridge any more—nothing that her own mind could not cure. Margie made a pretence of making her comfortable, and went out. Mrs. Draybridge continued to look up at God. How long, oh Lord, how long? she asked Him, but He did not reply.

The night-light had burnt itself out in Miranda Stewart's room. Miranda was fast asleep, and, thought Margie, probably having frightful dreams about her morning operation. The fuss people made about everyday occurrences. Margie examined the photographs that Miranda had put out on the small locker by her bedside. Her parents were typical, stodgy middle-aged bores. There was a picture, in quite a presentable frame, of a young man, good-looking but dull, thought Margie, then added, but he'd have to be dull to like the silly Stewart kid. She examined Miranda's underwear and decided the quality was good, then went into Room Six.

Cynthia Leftcart-Spratling was busy spitting when Margie and the Junior entered.

"This is a hell of a thing, isn't it?" she said to Margie.

"It would have been worse if you had had them enucleated," Margie said.

"It couldn't be," Cynthia replied, and swore several oaths that somehow, coming out of that pale white face, exuding from that red gash of a mouth, seemed far more indecent than they really were—which was, pretty indecent.

"That's quite enough of that!" Margie told Cynthia, and accompanied by her Junior, made an attempt at a dignified departure.

Running down the corridor to meet them, came one of the Night Nurses from the Theatre.

"Night sister's got a patient for you!" she panted. "He'll be up in a minute."

"That gives us a full house," Margie replied. "This is a fine time to turn up. What's happened?"

"Car crash—knocked down an old lady just going to work—he's in a bad way."

"Why isn't he going into a public ward?" Trimmings asked.

"He's conscious—wants a private room. The old girl's in a public ward. She's only dazed. Hurry, Nurse, he'll be up in a minute. You'll need a fracture bed."

"What's he got?"

"Broken leg, broken arm and a broken nose."

"He did the thing properly!"

"Not to mention cuts, bruises and a general bashing about. Be quite good-looking when he's washed!" The nurse hurried off. Margie and her colleague prepared Room Seven. "Put the announcements out, Pat," Margie said. "House Full. No Private Patients taken. I wonder what the devil this chap was doing out so early in the morning."

They wheeled him down a few minutes later. He looked tired and a little astonished. He kept asking if the old lady was all right. Whilst they prepared him for the doctor, the Junior made a note of all particulars. One of the stretcher party explained he had had temporary concussion. He himself assured them he was all right. "But the old lady—is she all right?" Yes, she was all right. Shock, that's

all. His name? Arthur Lane. Yes, L-A-N-E. His eyes shone too brightly, but that was because he was just beginning to feel the pain. When it first happened it was all too sudden and crowded and busy a moment for the mind to feel any physical reaction. She had scurried across, as many old women do, eyes shut tight and a prayer to their Maker that they might be allowed to get to the other side in safety. And he had jammed everything on and pulled the steering wheel away from her. This saved her; instead of hitting her dead on, she was caught by the mudguard and travelled thereon like a quaint old scarecrow; finally slipping to the roadway, alive, kicking and not really grazed, but suffering from shock. He had continued with screeching brakes into the island in the centre of the road. Unavoidable. He saw it coming. Heard himself saying "Here we go!", and the car buckled as it dashed itself into the street lamp-standard. The steering-wheel broke his arm, there was a crash of glass, and he received what seemed to be a man's size punch on the nose, and the clutch pedal, as if worked by a giant, pushed back suddenly and seemed to buckle his leg up behind him. For a moment all he knew was that there had been, in his life, two seconds of nothing at all but a big bang! There was the taste of blood in his mouth, and he had not enough strength to get himself out of the wreckage, but there was no pain; not until they prepared him for the Resident Surgeon at the hospital.

The R.S. came in with a young assistant, yawning and rather bored with being awakened so early. He nodded to Arthur and conducted a quick examination. He knew what he was doing, Arthur perceived, and was relieved. The dark nurse had cleaned his face with hydrogen peroxide, and applied some methylated iodine, but he still had a lot of muck in his nose—or so it seemed now.

They decided to set the arm and the leg at once. They gave him an ether anæsthetic, and he held the dark nurse's hand, repeating, "That old lady—is she all right?" until he went under.

The Resident Surgeon completed the job, ordered a quarter of morphia and a hundredth of atropine; nodded good night and returned to his quarters.

Back at her desk, with her red silk-lined cloak about her, Margie shivered slightly. Dawn was always a chilly moment. She made a note of her new patient and entered such information as the day staff would need. Arthur Lane, Room Seven. She had a sudden feeling that she knew or had heard of him, or read about him. He wasn't a bad-looking boy. Not at all bad. When they'd got some of that bone out of his nose and taken the stitches out of his face, he'd be quite presentable.

Mr. Gidney, Lutina Bell the film star, Mike Mahoon the song writer, Mrs. Dreary Draybridge, the Stewart girl, God's gift to Society Cynthia Leftcart-Spratling, and Arthur Lane. . . . At least having the Private Rooms full gave one something to do at night. It was better than just sitting about mooning and wishing one was at a dance or on a sofa having a bit of fun. Gosh! That reminded her; she hadn't finished the last chapter of that 'hot' novel. . . . She completed her remarks in the Record and reached for her book, but she did not concentrate at once; her mind drifted back to the boy in Room Seven. . . . Arthur Lane, she thought, I'm sure I've heard the name before.

Down in the public ward, Mrs. Durkin slept soundly, aided by a weak dose of morphia. Her old, care-lined face seemed strangely

peaceful as she breathed steadily. One would have thought that this accident was the first real holiday she had had in years.

CHAPTER SIX

MRS. DURKIN HAD, INDEED, NOT LONG BEEN UP. AT FIVE O'CLOCK, in an indignant, high-pitched tone, Mrs. Durkin's alarm clock went off, and, in its excitement at its own loud noises, moved around slightly on its feet as if the better to see that Mrs. Durkin had responded to its strident ringing. Mrs. Durkin responded, as she had always responded, with a few muttered curses. Then, before the alarm bell had ceased, she left her bed with some agility and quickly lit a candle, stopped the alarm and waddled over to the wash-basin. She hurriedly dipped her gnarled old hands into the cold water in the basin, and sluiced water over her wrinkled face. It fair took your breath away, it did, that sudden icy wetness, whoosh! over your face, and you were gasping and puffing and wide awake in no time. Ugh! It would be nice to wash in hot water! Still, no time for that at five in the morning.

Mrs. Durkin dressed hurriedly, half-talking, half-grumbling to herself as she put on her drab, out-of-date clothes. Then, once completely dressed, she pulled back the curtains and opened the windows slightly and hurried across the room, shielding the candle from the newly-created draught, and entered her small kitchen-main-room-drawing-room-and-parlour combined. Here she proceeded to cut herself a thick slice of bread which, carefully lopping off the crust, she took to the stove, and, from a frying-pan with a half-inch layer of dripping, she dipped the bread into the dripping until it had a generous covering, and spread it with her finger. As she munched, she put the kettle on and made herself a cup of tea, tidying up whilst awaiting the boiling of the kettle. Mrs. Durkin gulped the tea down and blew out her cheeks between each mouthful, and murmured to herself, "Blimey, that's good!", started to put on her blue, much-stained coat, and, half-running, half-walking, made her way from the back of the seaside town towards the sea-front and the residential and hotel section. It was a long walk, but she was used to it, for she had been fortunate enough to 'hold' her present job for some eighteen months now, and that was a good thing. That money coming in each week, regular-like. That was comforting.

She plodded on and finally reached her destination; she let herself in and made her way to the lounge. Here Mrs. Durkin surveyed the room with a reproving but watery eye; it was always the same when they had a bit of a 'do'—the mess next morning was a fair picnic.

Not that Mrs. Durkin had ever been on a picnic. Of course, it might have been that she did not know anybody who would take her: in fact, she did not seem to know anybody, anyway. That was the gossip at Mon Repos, the small hotel where Mrs. Durkin worked; but Mrs. Durkin knew different.

Perhaps they would have been surprised to learn that the old lady had a good fifty friends—staunch friends. Perhaps they would have been surprised, even indignant, that the 'funny old thing' who came to clear up *dared* to have friends.

Mrs. Durkin sighed deeply, and turned back to her work. She worked well for a very old lady, with a preoccupied air of concentration, until she found something that made her lined old face light up as if lit by an unseen lamp. Deep down in a corner of the sofa she had discovered a magazine. Not any magazine, but a magazine all about the films.

For Mrs. Durkin's friends were all film stars. Not that she had even a nodding acquaintance with any of them, but they were wonderful friends. She called them all by their christian names—knew, by the twopenny film papers, of their activities, their loves, their previous lives, their hopes and ambitions.

She was a slow reader, so she smuggled the magazines home (they were the only things she ever thieved from Mon Repos) and read them slowly, aloud to herself, happy, in another world; a world of shining crystal-like palaces, where the film stars lived, of majestic bathing-pools with vivid blue water and laughing people with lots of loud, Sousa-like music playing all the time.

Those were her friends. On Saturday afternoon she could afford to visit them at one of their 'at homes', to see their latest 'piece'. It is true that there were lots of other people present, and silly small boys who clapped or cried in the wrong place. It is true, too, that she was not allowed to sit where she pleased—she was far too near the picture—but, nevertheless, all such personal mundane affairs soon disappeared once her friends appeared.

How wonderful they were—and especially now that they talked and even appeared in beautiful coloured tints. But Mrs. Durkin had one special favourite, a favourite that she shared with twenty million other film fans—Lutina Bell.

What a wonderful actress she was, what a lovely woman, what a sincere, delightful friend! Mrs. Durkin never missed a Bell picture; even if the picture was playing the first half of the week only, she went without her supper to see her favourite.

On this especial morning she was flushed with excitement; for a moment she forgot the hotel work, the draught of cold air from the windows on her back; she forgot even that she was old Mother Durkin, for on the front of the magazine was a blurred (blurred because she hadn't her glasses), but recognizable photograph of Lutina Bell, and the words underneath it danced excitedly at Mrs. Durkin: 'Arrived in England this week! See story, page two, inside.'

This week! Lutina in England! It was too good to be true. Her favourite from across the sea. Her very, very best friend! Mrs. Durkin could hardly believe her tired old eyes; she was shaking with excitement. Her best friend, the most wonderful actress of them all!

Hastily, as if she might be observed, she hid the film magazine in her tattered old coat, and hurried to complete her work. What a life! She collected her 'bits and pieces' and, with her film magazine under her coat, clutched tightly through the thin material, she set off for the Majestic.

It was not yet light, but Mrs. Durkin was used to walking in the dark, it was all right except when it came to crossing the roads. She hated that, and there was never a friendly policeman to help. The only thing to do was to look both ways, and if nothing was coming, then to run across as fast as you could go.

This morning there was a car coming, but you couldn't tell just how near or how far it was away. Of course, it might not be moving

even. Well, it was no use waiting for ever, and anyway, the thing to do was to screw up your courage and hope God was looking your way when you took your life in your hands and made a jump for it.

From the sudden screeching noise Mrs. Durkin knew that she had misjudged the distance, and then, oh my gracious, she was thrown in the air and seemed to be floating. Well, it was a contented feeling, and, it seemed, heaven was going to be as nice as they prophesied, until, with a horrible jolt, she fell on to the road. The breath was knocked out of her old body, and she just lay there. In her astonishment she could only wonder where God was; He obviously had not been looking her way that morning.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE DAY STAFF TROOPED INTO THE PRIVATE WARD, CHATTERING IN whispers, and laughing softly, and, of course, awakening a number of patients in the semi-private wards A and B. During the overlap period the Juniors collected the vases of flowers which were placed outside the rooms overnight and changed the water, whilst the day nurses prepared weak tea for the patients and strong tea for themselves. Trimmings came in and cursed.

"What's biting you?" the plump Morgan asked, gaily; she was even good-tempered first thing in the morning.

"That Society trollop in Six!" complained Margie. "I had a row with her again, and she threatened to report me to Sister.—If I get another black mark I'll get the boot!"

"Well, don't get another black mark," suggested Charteris.

"Oh, shut up! These rich bitches are all the same!" Margie growled.

"Never mind about her worries—what I want to know is, did the film star arrive?" Morgan inquired excitedly.

"Yes, she's here all right, and you'll never believe it when I tell you."

"What's happened to her?"

"You'll die when I tell you!"

"What?"

"Oh, come on, Nurse!"

"Well, you'll have to hear it from Sister."

"Don't be such a cow!"

"That's a dirty trick!"

"You said you'd tell us!"

"Well, all right," Margie said, as if reluctant to tell them. "Though, for God's sake look surprised when Sister tells you, 'cos we're to be sworn to secrecy or something."

"Gosh, it sounds awful!"

"She looks so sweet, too, in her films."

"She looked sweet last night when they brought her in."

"The suspense is terrible—for Gawd's sake, Nurse, have a heart," pleaded Grant. "Spill the beans—what's the dirt?"

"Lutina Bell, the famous blue-eyed film star . . ." Trimmings began in an important tone.

"For God's sake go on, Nurse!"

"... is ..." she paused dramatically.

"Yes?"

"... Hollywood's greatest Drunkard!"

"What?"

"Don't make me laugh!"

"Come again!"

"You're kidding!"

The nurses were all incredulous.

"I swear it!" said Margie Trimmings, delighted at the consternation she had caused.

"Oh no—no, not Lutina—not that pretty, lovely creature," wailed Nurse Morgan. "I cannot believe, I cannot, no!"

"That 'pretty, lovely creature' came in here last night and was so drunk when I gave her a glass of water she thought it was brandy—and gulped it down in a way that proved she was no schoolgirl sipping lemonade!"

"You've no right to tell us," Ella said.

"You wanted to know!" flashed back Margie hotly, "and, anyway, Sister'll tell you when she comes round—she's a souse."

"Gosh, I dunno, but it sort of makes you want to cry," the Canadian girl remarked.

"It's—it's horrible!" said Ella. "But come on, we're late. Are the teas ready, Nurse?"

"Yes, dear," said Morgan.

"Come on, then, let's go," said Ella.

The nurses took the trayloads of mugs filled with steaming weak tea, and Nurse Morgan, as was her custom, burst into 'Brightest and best of the Sons of the Morning' to herald the birthday of a new day. There were many patients at the Brantling General Hospital who had reason to remember early morning tea and Nurse Morgan's shrill hymnal which was, later in the day, varied by attempts at the latest song hits.

"'Dawn on our darkness and lend us Thine aid'," sang Nurse Morgan, and, pushing the door of A open, she blinked into her spectacles and wished everyone a good morning.

In the Men's Ward there came a moan.

"Good God, do you Sisters of Mercy *have* to come in so early? What is the idea?" Duffy, the tubby little journalist, asked.

"Do we have to go into all that again?" Nurse Grant replied, putting his mug of tea down on the cupboard by his bedside.

"How can a fellow get well when you spoil his beauty sleep?"

"His *what* sleep?"

"All right, all right, you win, but how about calling me again with some piping hot breakfast at *eleven*?"

"In ten minutes you're going to be washed—then you can go to sleep again."

"That's right—so that you can wake me in half an hour with that mess you call breakfast!" said Duffy.

"If you have any complaints——" Grant began, with a grin.

"Aw, Nurse, if only you could cook!" Duffy said.

"You sound like Mr. Mahoon," Grant replied.

"Don't tell me he's making a play for you, too?" Duffy asked.

"I didn't say so."

"I must go and talk to that Casanova—maybe he's got a story".

"Don't you ever think of anything but 'stories'?"

"Yes—Beer!"

"I thought as much."

"Nursie dear—can I get up today?—I'd like to take a snoop around—might get an idea for a feature—you know—life in a big hospital . . ."

Nurse Grant looked serious for the first time; it was true, they had promised Duffy he could get up for a short while, but it wouldn't be a good thing if he nosed about and learned of Lutina Bell's presence in the Private Ward.

"Well——" she began.

"Don't say 'well' like that. Sister said yesterday——"

"We'll see."

"'We'll see!'" mimicked Duffy. "What did the hospital nurse say to any and all questions? 'We'll see!' It's like the Spanish *mañana!*"

"Not the *manana* we are together, the merrier we'll be?" Grant asked, with an innocent air, as she gave out the mugs of tea to the other patients.

Duffy groaned again: "There are times," he said, "when it is my painful duty to tell you that your 'corney' puns take the cake. How you dare——"

But with a smile, Nurse Grant had gone.

Miranda Stewart was pleased to get her early tea and to discover that the Night Nurse had gone off duty. Nurse Logan was a sweet little thing who was almost as sorry for Miranda as Miranda was for herself. Nurse Logan was positively apologetic that Miranda would get no breakfast.

"What time is the execution?" Miranda asked.

"Don't feel like that," Ella counselled. "It's nothing. You go down at noon."

"I don't like the sound of that 'go down', Nurse!" Miranda replied.

"We'll give you something to make you sleepy and less nervy in a little while. Would you like to see a paper?" Ella asked.

"Thanks. Have you a lot of patients?"

"We're full in the Private Ward—all seven rooms occupied."

"Are you always full?"

"No—it varies. Take yesterday. We had three vacant rooms—they'd been vacant for weeks—then—well, you came, and then—er—and—a—er—Miss Smith came in, and very late a young man who'd had a bit of a crash——"

"Yes, I heard him arrive, early this morning, wasn't it?"

"Yes—he's in Seven. He's going down this morning, too."

"Before or after me?"

"Before, I think. I haven't looked at the Orders yet."

"I resent that—I got here first," said Miranda.

For a moment Ella thought she was serious. "Maybe he's worse than you are," she replied.

"Oh, I'm all right—mine's not a bit serious."

"I know. We'd have performed an emergency, if you had been."

"No—it's just a precaution—you see, I'm going to Canada."

"That's nice. We've got a Canadian nurse here."

"Oh, well, she can give me some tips," suggested Miranda.

"Yes, she'll be round later."

"Where are my flowers?"

"Getting a drink; they'll be returned soon."

"Oh, thanks."

"Well, I'll send in the paper. I expect you'd rather look at a picture one today."

"I usually do, anyway."

"Right-o."

Ella went off to take a look at Lutina Bell. She found Nurse Charteris looking down at the star as she slept.

"In spite of Trimmings, I think she's lovely," whispered Charteris.

"Yes—once she gets rid of those dark rings!"

"Shall I wake her?"

"No—not this morning—probably best to let her sleep. You have the tea," said Ella.

Charteris made a grimace. "Thanks, but I like a good cup of tea," she replied.

"Well, come on, kiddie—who's next?"

"God's gift to the Song World—you take him, Nurse, will you? He makes me sick——"

"O.K., kiddie—take a look at Number Seven—I think Morgan's giving Draybridge and the Spratling girl theirs."

Arthur was fast asleep when Nurse Charteris looked in. He had obviously been given something to keep him quiet. His face was badly cut, and his nose was in a very bad way. He looked very handsome, Evelyn thought, as she lifted his head back on to the pillow. She glanced at the chart above his head and made a little rueful grimace; it seemed the young man had done the thing properly. 'Everything but the kitchen stove!' she thought; there was precious little else he could break. The resection of the nasal septum was for eleven-thirty. He'd be chatting comfortably that evening. She rather hoped it would be before she went off duty. It would be a pleasant change from the 'phoney' nonsense that Mike Mahoon talked. Idly, as she studied his battered face, Evelyn hoped that he had not been conscious when Margie Trimmings was on duty. It would be nice to sneak this boy from under Margie's pointed nose.

And Margie, at that moment, the morning paper propped up in front of the teapot, stopped eating her 'dinner' as she read: 'Arthur Lane in Car Crash.' So that's why she knew the name. He was the famous racing motorist!

And very nice too, thought Margie. Quite a gathering! Lutina Bell, Mike Mahoon and Arthur Lane; Brantling General Hospital would soon be the Refuge for all Celebrities seeking new limbs, life, sanctity, peace and salvation! You want the best people, *we* have them, she thought. Then, as was her custom, she frowned. As she thought of 'best people' her mind instantly went to Room Six—Cynthia Leftcart-Spratling. Margie breathed heavily. "That bitch!" she said.

CHAPTER EIGHT

DAPHNE SHORT, ONE OF THE PROBATIONERS, SIGHED, AND, GRIPPING her little enamelled white tray, started on her rounds. It was the one part of the day she hated worst of all. She supposed that, sooner

or later, one got past the stage when anything bothered one—as a nurse—but she was still shy and sensitive, and almost before she had taken off her hat and coat they had put her on the easiest job. She didn't mind a bit scrubbing floors or carrying basins or taking tea round, but she did draw the line at going through the Ward every morning and asking, in a voice she hoped was utterly impersonal: "Have you had a motion this morning?" Of course, someone had to do it, but she wished that they had been more understanding and let her get more acclimatized before doing this highly embarrassing job. It wasn't as if she minded anything else; nothing at all. Blood, and all that side of it didn't worry her especially. She could only sigh and carry on and pray that one day she would defeat that shyness, that childish complex that made her want to curl up with utter shame when she inquired, frowning down at the book in front of her to hide her blushes, and tapping the paper with a pencil as if impatiently, but, in an effort to tap the terrible pauses before the reply came: "Have you had a motion this morning?" She hoped to God that day would be soon.

Down in Matron's room, 'Old Nick', the Chief Surgeon, was taking a cup of tea with her, and his anæsthetist, Darlington Breeze. 'Old Nick' was tall, keen-faced and with piercing eyes, bushy eyebrows and an inquisitive nose. There were two heavy lines linking his nose to the corners of his mouth and they grew deeper and more set when he operated. His hobby was gramophone records—of the better kind. Darlington Breeze played squash in the winter and cricket in the summer. He was quiet, engaged to a girl with money, and liked his work. Matron had a fine face, courageous, strong, sympathetic. She loved her work and she loved the hospital. She had had her chance of going to a bigger and more important hospital in London, but she had refused; Brantling General meant more to her than any London post.

As they drank their tea, the conversation ranged from the London Hippodrome, where Darlington had taken his fiancée the previous Saturday, to a new recording by Sir Henry J. Wood. 'Old Nick' refused a biscuit, assuring Matron that he would spoil his lunch.

"Nonsense," Matron replied. "If you don't eat something you'll rumble all through the Ops!"

'Old Nick' smiled, but, nevertheless, shook his head. "Breeze will, I'm sure," he added. "These younger men need more food!"

"Because they call you 'Old Nick', you needn't think you've reached your dotage!" Matron said.

"H'm! I don't mind the 'Nick', but I do draw the line at 'Old Nick'—it has a nasty, unpleasant, too-near-the-truth ring!"

"Nonsense—it's a form of endearment," Breeze told him.

"Maybe! It's funny the way one gets to know one's nickname—bit of a surprise if the nurses knew that I know!" 'Old Nick' said.

"Yes, I don't know why we don't invent names for them—for instance, I think 'Garbo' would be good for the blonde nurse in the D block, and 'Tubby' for Morgan in the P.W."

"'Chubby' is better, more cheerful, don't you think?"

"What about Matron, now—what do you suggest?"

"Well, now——"

But before they were able to decide, the Assistant Theatre Sister came in to say that the operating patients were ready.

"All right, Sister. Come on, Darlington," 'Old Nick' said.

As they arrived in the ante-room to put on their pale green operating costumes, 'Old Nick' discussed the deplorable way in which a number of first-class orchestras were varying their classical programmes with 'bastard' attempts at jazz—in order to capture an additional audience group. Darlington Breeze remarked that there was a well-known jazz composer in the Private Wards.

"What's his name?" 'Old Nick' inquired.

"Mahoon—Mike Mahoon."

"Never heard of him," said Nick. Five minutes went by whilst, for that period of time, the two men washed and scrubbed their hands and dipped them in spirit. 'Old Nick's' assistant was already in the Theatre, together with the Sister and four nurses; all of them were in pale green gowns (less glare than white ones), caps, masks and material-made slip-overs to cover their shoes. 'Old Nick', now in his Theatre rig-out, complete with rubber boots and a rubber apron, rather like a good-looking baker, was reading the chart on Arthur Lane, which was held up for him by a 'dirty' nurse (one who was not going to 'wash up', and who might, therefore, touch articles which had not been sterilized). Old Castle, the Resident Surgeon, had set the patient's leg and arm at dawn, and attended to the minor cuts and abrasions. 'Old Nick' was now going to operate on Arthur's nose. Previously he made a tour of the wards and made a personal examination whenever possible. Darlington Breeze unpacked his apparatus. 'Old Nick' ordered one of the 'dirty' nurses to raise the electrically driven operating table another four inches. This was done, and then, as Arthur was wheeled in, 'Old Nick' carefully noted the position of the various instruments so that he could reach them easily, although his assistant or the Sister would hand some of them to him. Arthur, given a preliminary injection upstairs, was already drowsy, and he could barely find the energy to greet the Surgeon. There was a matter-of-fact, impersonal air in the Theatre. Arthur grinned; he felt strangely talkative, and yet couldn't really be bothered to express his thoughts. Darlington had decided on gas and oxygen for this operation, and, talking naturally to Arthur, he began to apply the nozzle over Arthur's nose and mouth. "Now breathe regularly and deeply, deeply . . . deeply . . . deeply. . . . Breathe DEEPLY—DEEPLY—DEEPLY——" Arthur saw the anæsthetist above him, and behind the anæsthetist the big Theatre lights that cast no shadows, and he tried to explain that they mustn't operate yet as he wasn't unconscious . . . he laughed and laughed, and a voice kept saying: "Deeply, deeply, deeply, DEEPLY. . . ." Suddenly he was whistled high into the air, like a rocket. A pleasant mass of white blankness appeared in front of his eyes and in his mind.

"Can I start?" 'Old Nick' asked Breeze. Breeze nodded.

The nurses had painted Arthur's cheeks and nose and chin with iodine, and covered the rest of him. A small chromium-plated electric light, similar in style to those used in coalmines, had been placed around 'Old Nick's' brow. There was a pause whilst he studied Arthur's nose, detaching it, as it were, from the rest of his face, the rest of his personality. Then the lines deepened about his mouth, and he started. Once he began to operate, he was a different person, he became, indeed, 'Old Nick'. He worked fast; he made quick decisions and he was abominably rude to the staff. No one worked fast enough; no one was any good; no one ought to have been in the Operating Theatre at all; those were the unsaid messages in the tone of his voice, in the

few things he demanded. Little, actually, was said. There was the snip, snip as he cut away bone, and the crunch as he carefully broke the fragments with mathematical precision, but in the snarl when he demanded his assistant to "Dry!", or the curt request for "Hammer!" or "Sand-bag under left shoulder, Nurse!" there was a fierceness that had earned him his nickname. Tap! Tap! went the hammer, and in went the swab to dry, and then an occasional "How is it?" to Breeze, and the anæsthetist, checking the patient's pulse and breathing all the time, replied: "All right, proceed!" And on with the work with a quick request made in that same hateful voice: "Wipe!" and a nurse drew a sterilized gauze across his forehead now wet with perspiration. Then, suddenly, as if he had got bored with shaking and tapping and cutting and scraping, 'Old Nick' straightened up.

"We'll put the nose splints on," he said. Arthur's operation was over. 'Old Nick' moved away from the operating table whilst his assistant took over. When this was done, Arthur was lifted back on to the trolley and returned to his private room. Safely back in bed, he was given, unbeknown to him, another injection. . . .

Back in the Theatre, Miranda Stewart looked anxiously up into Darlington Breeze's face. She, too, was sleepy, but her anxiety had lessened the effect of the sedative.

"Will I be all right?" she asked drowsily.

"Of course."

Breeze had decided to give her an arm injection. He quickly pierced the carefully prepared place on Miranda's arm with the hypodermic. "There!" he said. "Did you notice that?"

"No—just a faint prick in the arm," Miranda replied.

"That's right. How old are you?" he asked, in order to get her to talk.

With an effort she replied: "Twenty-two, but what business is it of yours?"

There was a faint ripple of amusement in the Theatre; eyes, the only expressionable part of faces in that swathed atmosphere, lightened up for a moment, then the impersonal 'atmosphere' superseded the friendly.

"Never mind," said Breeze, "just count up to twenty."

"Why? I said I was twen'-two—twen'-two—twen'-two, why, who said so . . . twen'-two, twen'-three . . ." murmured Miranda.

"Can I begin?" 'Old Nick' asked.

"Go ahead," said Darlington Breeze.

CHAPTER NINE

"NOW, NURSIE, SISTER DISTINCTLY TOLD ME——" DUFFY BEGAN, but Ella Logan stopped him.

"Yes, I know—you can get up, but you're not to make a nuisance of yourself," she said.

"Who—me?"

"Yes, you! You can go down into the Children's Ward, or you can go in and see Number One—that's Mr. Gidney—and Mr. Mahoon

in Three would be very pleased to meet you," Ella told the journalist.

"I bet he would," Duffy replied. "Anything for a bit of publicity. Who's this Gidney?"

"Mr. Gidney's a very nice, quiet gentleman——"

"What's he in for?"

"A Nephrectomy."

"H'm! I think I'll go and see the children," Duffy hastily replied.

"Silly—that's only a kidney op."

"Is it catching?" Duffy asked.

"You'll catch something if you don't put a dressing-gown on—you can't walk about this hospital in pyjamas only."

"Anyone would think I'd been sent here to do a six months' stretch, the way I'm ordered about!" complained Duffy. "I'm accustomed to a little respect."

"Very little, I should think," Ella added quickly.

Duffy scratched his bald patch. "Ah, well, the dear little children first, I suppose—any interesting ones?"

"Now how do I know?"

"All right—all right. Well, it'll be a relief to have a look around."

"Now, mind you, only the Children's Ward, and definitely only Mr. Gidney in One or Mr. Mahoon in Three!" Nurse Logan cautioned.

"All right; not even the Operating Theatre!" said Duffy.

Ella smiled after him, and bustled off to see if the morning dressings had been prepared. Duffy went down in the lift and found his way to the front of the hospital. Several nurses gave him suspicious glances, all of which he completely parried with a disarming smile. To reach the Children's Ward he had to pass through two large public wards, and, seeing a friendly looking nurse who reminded him of a famous Swedish film star, he decided to 'stop-off' and see if any of them presented any news angle or 'sob-stuff' that he could build into a story.

"Morning, Nurse. Any new patients?" he asked. He decided on this approach, as it made it look as if he had been around the ward before.

"No—just the old lady."

"Which one's that?"

"Who are you—a new doctor?"

Good, the nurse had a sense of humour.

"No—I'm important—up in the Private Ward. That's me—Big Shot!"

"Are you allowed out?" the nurse enquired.

"Now why do they use prison expressions all the time in these places? Our Sister said I could snoop about a bit. I'm on the *Daily Gazette*, and——"

"The *London Daily Gazette*?" said the Nurse. "Well, let's see—there's a poor old girl who came in drunk yesterday, and the young lady over there fell off her bicycle shed, and the old lady was run over at dawn this morning——"

"This morning—that's more like news. What hit her, one of the Corporation water-carts?"

"No—I think it was a *Daily Gazette* van!"

"You're too smart for the Public Wards. We can use you up in the Snobs Department."

"Not me, I'm a Socialist!" the fair nurse replied.

"I knew it had its good points," said Duffy. "Well, I don't think any of these sad stories would make headlines."

"No, I suppose not——"

"Well, I'm off to give the children a treat," Duffy said, and started to move off.

"Sorry we can't help you," the nurse continued. "How's Mr. Lane?" she added.

"How should I know. I only move in the worst circles," Duffy replied. "I suppose I couldn't suggest that you became a registered reader?"

"Well, he's in your ward—up alongside the *other* snobs!"

"Something tells me, you want to be alone!"

"I look like her, don't I?"

"Yes—you do—but what's Mr. Lane doing?"

"Well, he's the fellow who knocked down the poor old lady this morning. *The Arthur Lane.*"

"Oh," said Duffy, "the plot thickens. I think we've got a paragraph. Now why didn't they tell me that upstairs?"

"I think Mr. Lane is in a bad way."

"Really?"

"Yes, don't be so excited," said the nurse. "Aren't you newspapermen callous!"

"Lane knocked her down—is that it?"

"I think so."

"Is she all right?"

"Yes—dazed, but very happy—want to talk to her? She'd like a visitor—don't suppose she'll get one."

"You're one of the few human nurses I've met. What's your name?"

"Not for publication!"

"All right, not for publication."

"Lily Fraser."

"Nice."

"The 'Lily's' awful."

"All right, have it your own way. Lead me to the old gal," Duffy requested.

"Mrs. Durkin—this is a gentleman from a big newspaper—he's come to pay you a visit," the Nurse explained.

Mrs. Durkin turned her head in their direction, and Duffy beamed genially at her.

"Good morning, Mrs. Durkin."

"Very good of you, I'm sure. Had a bit of an accident," she explained.

He nodded sympathetically.

"Is the car—the driver—all right?"

"Yes, I believe so," Duffy replied.

"That's good. That's good. My fault, I expect. Hate roads," explained Mrs. Durkin. "Dark early in the morning, you know."

"Yes, I know. What do you do, Mrs. Durkin?—I mean, you were out early, weren't you?"

Mrs. Durkin smiled, displaying a pale pair of gums. Her teeth were encased in a glass of disinfected water beside her. "Always up early. Got to be. Go charring. Work at the Mon-Reposs on the front first, got hit by somethink on the way to me second place," she explained, and then stopped and thought hard for a moment.

"My maggyzine—my paiper"—she asked, anxiously—"didn't lose me film paiper, did I?"

"No, I think it's in the cupboard," Nurse Fraser replied.

Duffy smiled and tried to think of something to say to the old lady that would enable him to leave. Certainly not much of a story; knocked down by a celebrity in the black-out didn't rate very highly. "Film fan at your age?" he asked.

"Rather—only bit of fun I have," said the old crone.

That was sort of sad, thought Duffy; trouble was he was too soft-hearted for a journalist; he hesitated another moment. "Who are your favourites?" he asked, by way of appearing interested. Perhaps there was something in a line 'eighty years old, says Clark Gable her favourite' . . . He paused.

"All favourites—make me happy . . ." murmured Mrs. Durkin, "but best of lot, Lootina Bell—like her best of all."

"Ah yes—she's good, isn't she?" Duffy answered.

"Best of all," repeated Mrs. Durkin. "An' she's coming to film here—she's here now in London."

"So I read," Duffy assured her.

"Was going to write her a letter," Mrs. Durkin explained, "going to when I'm better. . . ."

"That's right, mind you do!"

"Thank her for lots of nice pieces. . . . Like the films, I do . . . won't lose my job at that awful ole hotel-place?"

"No, no, of course not. Just rest now," Nurse Fraser said.

"Good!" said Mrs. Durkin promptly.

"I'll come and see you again," Duffy promised, and turned to Nurse Fraser. "And you, too, Garbo! Thanks!"

He hurried back upstairs to the Private Ward. Ella and podgy Nurse Morgan were coming down the corridor with the dressings. "You're back soon," said Ella.

"Nursie, why didn't you tell me about Arthur Lane?" Duffy asked her.

"Now, you can't see him—he's in a bad way——"

"Well, that's news. What's wrong? Will he live?"

"Of course—broken leg and arm—nose fracture——"

"H'm—where's the nearest telephone?"

"Now, kiddie——"

"Nursie, please—he's quite important—it'll do for the *Evening Merc*—we run that, you know. What about a telephone?"

"There's one in Sister's room, but you can't use it."

"Thanks," said Duffy. "You're an angel."

In Room Three, Mike Mahoon was becoming impatient. He rang the bell several times, and finally Nurse Charteris answered it. He was glad she came—behind those tortoiseshell glasses were two of the palest, prettiest green eyes.

"Yes, Mr. Mahoon?"

"Mike is the name. Listen, dear, where's this newspaper guy?"

"Mr. Duffield?"

"Who else, sweet? Sa-ay, I promised him an interview—I can't hang about all morning for him!"

Evelyn Charteris permitted herself to smile. "Are you leaving us?" she asked.

"Aw, gwan, beautiful—don't make a monkey out of me; I can't stand it, not when you start foolin'," Mike began. His brow creased

up in mock hurt; his hatchet face looked dejected. To think, thought Evelyn, that that Margie Trimmings fell for that sort of nonsense. She started towards the door.

"Hey, Nurse, wait a minute, will yah! Before you go, I gotta noo idea for a song—I hope you don't mind—I dedicated it to you—sort of thing I wanted to do ever since I first saw you——"

"Not now, Mr. Mahoon——"

"Aw, come on now. You're too beautiful to work in a hospital—say, can you croon? I could place you with a swell band if——"

"No, I am afraid I can't croon. I really must go now."

"Listen, sweetheart, come here, will you——"

"Hallo!" said Duffy, not bothering to knock. "Can I come in?"

"Aw, sure, sure. You—er—Duffer?"

"Yes, I'm Duffield."

"Come in—come in—glad to see you. Give Mr. Duffield a chair, will you, dearest? Thanks."

Evelyn left the two men, and with a look thanked Duffy for his intervention.

"Want an exclusive, eh? Of course, why not? Matter of fact I used to be a noospaperman myself," Mike explained airily. Duffy looked sceptical; he'd heard that sort of line before; he decided to challenge Mike on that score. He looked intently at the famous song-writer: "Oh, yes—what sheet were you on?"

"Oh—a paper in Indiana—the—er—the *Standard*—out of existence now, I expect," Mike blandly replied.

Duffy suppressed a smile; maybe someone ought to have explained to Mr. Mahoon that Indiana was a state and not a town. Duffy continued to stare; he wasn't so good on names but he could remember faces.

"Well, been doing a lot better for myself since then," Mike continued with what was supposed to be boyish self-depreciation. "Song-writing's a matter of moods," he explained. "One has to create in whatever mood one's in—you understand that, I guess?"

Duffy merely nodded.

"Take now—well, here I am in hospital—white walls, nurses, people being fixed up—that brings a certain mood on, you see? Well, a guy has to create in that mood—same as if my girl cut a date with me—blueness descends—I go to the piano—I am depressed—sorta low down—I moon around with the keys—maybe I play a few notes—I get an idea—an idea for a blue number—lonely boy waits for lovely girl—see what I mean? That's how I wrote my famous Pier idea—you heard it, didn't you? Great idea—here's how it goes. We sold a million copies in the States alone—lissen——" Without any embarrassment—without accompaniment and staring Duffy in the face, Mike, shaking with emotion, sang:

"There always seems to be
A lonely girl on ev'ry pier
Who's looking out to sea.
Here's hoping you'll agree
My duty is so very clear .
In asking her to tea."

Duffy nodded and got up to go. "Jolly good. Well, I suppose I ought to be going," Duffy replied.

"Hey—you've only just got here, Mr. Duffit. Take a look at that pile of songs on the dressing-table—not bad, eh? They used that one—yep, the one in the red cover in that Warner musical—sure paid plenty for that. Pretty tune. I got the idea of that in New York—say, you ever been in New York?" Mike added, a little suspiciously, before proceeding.

"No," Duffy replied. That seemed to ease Mike rather noticeably.

"My home-town," he explained. "Gee, I remember once I was flat broke there—yep, flat! Hadn't enough for cawfee an' doughnuts, gee, I was flat! Well, I'd just come out of Grand Central Station. I'd just mailed my last buck to my old mother in—er—in Indiana——"

Duffy looked at him suspiciously again. He was trying to place a face.

He walked over to the door; when there, he turned. "Thanks, Mr. Mahoon. But tell me something—were you ever in Newcastle?"

"Newcastle?" Mike's face paled. He tried to look nonchalant. "No—not me."

"Funny," remarked Duffy. "I have. Used to be on a paper there. You remind me of the pianist in a three-piece orchestra they had at a little restaurant called the Saint Regis."

"Yeah?" gulped the famous American song-writer.

"Yes—he ran the orchestra—but had a bit of trouble—got one of the waitresses into a spot of bother, I believe."

"Oh yeah?" Mike tried to be disinterested.

"Yep—name was—let's see—yes, that's it—Benny Neuberg. Well, so long, Mr. Mahoon," said Duffy, and strolled out.

Mike Mahoon was, by now, perspiring rather freely into his forty-five shilling silken pyjamas

CHAPTER TEN

PEACE WAS ESTABLISHED IN LUTINA'S ROOM BY THE SUGGESTION THAT she had a good rest that day and left the hospital the following morning. "You're darn tooting I'll leave in the morning, and that's final! There's not a guy who can stop me! Will someone ferchrisake get me some orange juice—my mouth's like the bottom of a parrot's cage!" Yet, when they brought up her breakfast, she was fast asleep again.

Also asleep were Miranda and Arthur after their successful operations. The Lady Cynthia Leftcart-Spratling was not sufficiently well to receive visitors, and she spent most of the morning spitting. Duffy, elated by his 'phone call from Sister's room and the way he had 'placed' the celebrated Mike Mahoon, decided to give Mr. Gidney a miss and to return to bed to read the papers. In Room Four, Mrs. Draybridge continued to stare up at the ceiling. Slowly she counted the seconds between the noises one heard outside in the corridor . . . seven, eight, nine, ten . . . bang! One of the nurses had dropped a tray in the kitchen. . . . Start again—one, two, three . . . shuffle shuffle. . . . That was a patient in slippers. Start again . . . one, two. . . .

And so she went on. This was varied with other counting games,

such as counting the pauses between the motors passing along the road; the songs or notes chirped by various birds outside her window, or counting the petals on the flowers she received each week, regularly, a standing order, once a week, three-shillings worth for Mrs Draybridge, Room Four, Private Ward, Brantling Hospital. . . . One, two, three, four, five, six, seven. . . . Oh God, oh God, have pity on me. Have pity on me, poor lonely Mrs. Ethel Draybridge, as I lie here alone in this big hospital. How have I sinned? If I am not to have him back, then be kind, oh God, be kind—you gave me this illness . . . surely, it was meant, ordained by you? Then take pity, don't let me go on just lying here. . . . I can't go on without him now, can I, God? You know how I love him, how I still care. Make him want to come back again and be with me; or just stop this utter misery. Oh, Edward, Edward, I love you so! Now, I must *concentrate* on something else. . . . What was that—a train puffing—such a long way away, in the distance. A train could take me to him. If I felt he wanted to see me I could get up. Oh, Edward! But I know you don't care, and I can't stand it. Oh God, do make him care—please, God—it is in your power. I know that you are able to work miracles—you worked a miracle to bring him into my life—and then you took him from me. . . . I mustn't think; if I was well, maybe he'd come back? Ah, but no—he left me before I was ill. And when I was ill that was his chance, but he didn't come; except to visit me. He'll be visiting me soon again. If only he wanted to come! It was a courtesy visit; for appearances' sake. Like the flowers. "Every week, flowers for my wife. . . . Mrs. Draybridge, Room Four, Private Ward, the Hospital . . . yes . . . No, no card . . . She'll know they're from me. . . ." He'd be coming soon. How long now before I see him? Four days, twenty-four hours a day, multiply twenty-four by four to bring it to hours, that makes, let's see now.

They had met at a party given in honour of the Relief of Mafeking. It was her first grown-up party, and she was only allowed to be present for a short time because little girls should be in bed and not with the grown-ups, though, indeed, she was fully eleven. Edward was there with his father—a great friend of her father's—an important young man of thirteen who was going on to Eton the next term. They did not meet again until, in somewhat similar circumstances though in direct contrast, for, again, her father held a 'gathering' (not exactly a party this time) for the death of Queen Victoria—the funeral cortege passed by their mansion and all wanted to pay homage to the wonderful old lady. Edith had been crying, and it had only added lustre to her large eyes. In black, with her hair pulled back away from her brow, even at fourteen she was striking. Edward, who was now a young blood of seventeen, and in his last year at Eton, couldn't help asking her, even at such a sad occasion, if she'd like to come down one half and see the College. The following year she watched him play cricket against Harrow School, and the year after that he went on to Sandhurst. Those were wonderful days. They discovered they were in love, and they spent all his 'leave' together—walking in the Park and snatching a few ecstatic moments alone in the drawing-room whilst he held one hand very tightly and she continued to play the piano with the other, and, full of excitement at the thrill of being alone and the thought that they might be discovered kissing, they could only find breath for short, electric kisses and deep sighs and taut skins.

It was a proud moment when Edward received his commission. They had a wonderful party at the Cecil, and when he responded to the toast they made to him, a resplendent figure in his superbly fitting uniform, he had risen to his feet and, in thanking them, said: "To you all, and, if I may, more especially to my fiancée!" She could, even when passing years clouded or partly obscured other memories, always see the keen, boyish face of Second Lieutenant Edward Draybridge, her husband-to-be, as he made this pronouncement, and simultaneously saluted her. His wife. That, indeed, was true love. Yet, even with the passing years, that love had never faltered. She had watched those fair, fine hairs deepen in the autumn of his years: she had seen the lines come and the little tale-telling crows' feet appear under the ever-bright blue eyes—criss-cross lines of service, received during his work in the glare of the Indian Empire. She had watched the jaw grow more firm and the chin more resolute as, with experience of life and men and war, he had grown up. From the excitement of that solitary star on his sleeve up to the red tabs of a Staff Major in the '14 war. From the hell of France to the happiness of Sussex . . . the little house they had taken when he was stationed nearby; the little house they had kept, as a refuge, an asylum, a place to find that quiet away from wars and relatives and other people; from struggle and bitterness and lust of power and everyday-worldness. . . . The little house where she waited in '29 for his return from the Evacuation of the Rhine. The little house they had, finally, to give up when they sailed with his regiment to India.

Maybe the contrast of India with its burning, searing heat and its myriad kaleidescopic moods and rotating peoples, its vastness, its fierceness, its under-currents, made every detail of the little house in Sussex stand out for ever, crystal clear, in every detail. The solitary lime tree in blossom in July (with the branches tapping gently when the sea-breeze rustled through) which they could see from their bed in the early morning . . . the idyllic quiet, just lying there until that thrush (which Edward had nicknamed 'Fred') came in, inquisitively. "Hoping that everything was circumspect," Edward would say, "it being the Sabbath!" The smell of wallflowers in April when they opened the french windows and dined by candlelight. The view of the haystack in the field by the bottom of their garden, silhouetted in the sunset; the nice, sleepy noise the water made dripping into the fat-bellied butt Edward had painted green and white one energetic Saturday afternoon. (As if three sets of lawn tennis hadn't been enough exercise!) Happy thought it was, one didn't realize just how much one had adored it all—and how desperately home-sick for it one would become. Indian contrast! the heat and the retreat to the Hills in the hot weather, and the dirt in spite of all efforts to keep things and persons clean. And the ghastly realization that leave home only made matters worse; the terrible wrench that had to be made from one's parents and the land one loved. Not even Edward could completely kill that; for Edward, too, was as homesick as she. Nor was it true, in their case, that they were able to make their life out East so important that they did not want to come home, or were unhappy at home, waiting impatiently to get back East again. Edward's life was the Army, and one did not complain.

Although they were not in the Quetta earthquake in '35, Edward was sent there to help alleviate the suffering, and, with further promotion and long leave, they had hoped they were to be home for good

at last. Bitter disappointment. Back in London for a glorious, wonderful time. Jubilee year, and it seemed that never had London been so exciting and never so desirable, and they talked of a house, not perhaps at Worthing, for one can never quite recapture the very same moment again, but one, say, near London or Aldershot, if indeed Edward was to be there, and then the news. . . . Exiled once more. Back to the East. Back this time to Singapore. They had talked it all over—for hours—without arriving at any decision other than the one they knew, in their hearts, they must follow. After all, Edward was fifty—one couldn't suddenly give up the Army now. . . . Later there would be a pension, and they still had a little money; then, ah! then they could come home—for good.

Malay was pleasant enough; it seemed richer and greener, and certainly less vast, less frightening than India. In Singapore they had the Polo Club and there was lawn tennis in the cool of the evenings and dances at the Raffles, the cross-roads of the world, where the tourists would come in and be thrilled at the Empire-builders behaving as if they were in London for the season. And there was cricket for Edward and bridge for Edith, but always there was that feeling, at sundown especially, when hundreds of rich brown-skinned Malays sat silently on their haunches and seawards the lights of boats, homeward bound, winked torturingly back at them as they sat with iced drinks on the terrace, that they should be at home now, in the quiet and coolness and the peace of England. They were, perhaps, the last link of a generation who really cared for England, the England of the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. . . . That group was being replaced, replaced by a new group, just as patriotic and who loved England as much, but the old order changeth; their ways, their ideas, their ideals and their plans for England were different. We Draybridges, Ethel thought, were, perhaps, in a land of shining new things, rather *passé*.

Certainly if they had only remained in England, the tragedy would not have occurred. You had to blame the East. That, perhaps, sounded melodramatic. It wasn't just the heat—after all, there were the rainy seasons and the Monsoon and the cold—it was the very earth, the smell, the fearful deep *magic* of the East, it dried you up or altered or twisted you . . . it brought out peculiar traits and underlined bitternesses and desires and frustrations. . . . The East was cruel. Well, it was cruel to Ethel Draybridge, wife of that distinguished-looking Colonel Edward Draybridge. Some people took to drink; and some even went native, and others even lowered themselves as to mix with native girls, and others just went to pieces. None of these ordinary things happened to Edith Draybridge, you could fight against those. You could confront other women, or go out of your way to win back your husband or, at any rate, you could make a brave attempt. There was something tangible about drink—if your husband began to take liquor or beat you or even got sunstroke you could *cope*. There was nothing you could do if *your husband suddenly ceased to care*.

That was the terrible tragedy of it all. That was something you couldn't fight against; that is, you could fight, but fighting against an unknown, an unseen, a *non-existent* adversary just tired you, wore you out and then, after all the striving, existed just as much as ever it did before. Edward just ceased to care. Finally, he had suggested they lived apart for a short while, as, he said, he felt he wanted to be

alone for awhile . . . nothing more than that. No anger. No flare-ups. No harsh words. No regrets.

He had never come back. They met, of course; and, when she became ill, this long illness, this inevitable illness brought on by worry and fear and failure—he had been kind. But no more. His love for her was dead, and hers for him as vivid and alive, as keen and vital as when, on that night of their betrothment he had toasted her: “. . . To you all, and, if I may, more especially to my fiancée!” Mrs. Draybridge sighed. She began counting the time between various noises outside the hospital . . . the ‘giddy-up’ of a milkman to his horse . . . one, two, three, four . . . the sound of a motor-car engine . . . one, two, three, four, five. . .

CHAPTER ELEVEN

LATER IN THE DAY, MIRANDA, PALE AND SHAKY, WAS SUFFICIENTLY recovered to ask: “When does my operation take place?” And was astonished to learn that it was all over. Next door but one, Arthur had also ‘come to’, and was spending a certain amount of time in being sick. With his nose swathed in a blob of bandages and two little rubber ‘splints’ peering out from them, he looked rather like a peculiar sort of insect or one of those Martian men one reads about in school-boys’ magazines; that is what he thought when he caught a glance of himself in the dressing-table looking-glass. “If my mother could only see me now!” he said to Ella Logan, as she clucked and mothered him and told him: “You’ll be all right, kiddie! My, but you got yourself into a mess.”

“How’s the old gal I hit?”

“She’s fine—sitting up and taking nourishment—just a bit of a shock—that’s all.”

“I’ll say it was a bit of a shock—it would do more than daze me if I got socked in the small of the back by a Mario-Gondarlo Special!”

“You didn’t bump her in the back; you only grazed her!”

“That shows what a good driver I am—basin, please, Nurse. I’m going to be ill again,” he said.

In the Private Ward kitchen the day and night staff met during the overlap period. By one pretence or another, most of the nurses had managed to ‘take a peek’ at Lutina.

“Is she sitting up and taking nourishment?” Margie Trimmins immediately asked on her arrival on duty. “I’ve been thinking about her all day.”

“She’s sober—if that’s what you mean!” said Nurse Grant.

“What’s she do all day—foam at the mouth and see pink elephants coming round the door?”

“She’s been sleeping most of the time—catching up on about five years’ continual drunk!” said Grant. “Though she started off in a flaming temper when she came to.”

“I’ll bet she did!” said Margie Trimmins.

“Charteris was there when it happened.”

“Actually, Sister sent me out of the room,” Nurse Charteris said, “but there were some of her film producers present—she wanted to

get up, but she's staying here till tomorrow morning. She's pretty, though!"

"She must have a cast-iron constitution," said Nurse Jenkins, enviously.

Ella Logan came in. "Hallo, kiddies," she said to the night staff. "Anything to worry about?" Margie Trimmings asked Ella as she started out.

"No—they're all doing fine; the Leftcart-Spratling girl can get up for a short while."

"She can walk out as far as I am concerned. How's the cissy in Five?"

"The Stewart girl?"

"Yes. Did she by any chance die, or does she want another night-light?"

"Why are you so sour, Nurse? Someone tip you out of a pram when you were young?"

Margie looked dark and superior. "When I get what I want I'll be nice."

"Good God, what a resolution! So long, Nurse," said Ella, and paused at the doorway. "By the way, try and leave Arthur Lane in peace, will you, there's a dearie. He's hardly in a fit state to deal with you—for the moment!"

This made Margie smile. Yes, that was right, there was the young Mr. Lane. Really, if Brantling could keep up the standard in the Private Ward—Mike Mahoon, Lutina Bell and Arthur Lane—she wouldn't consider moving up to London. Margie never stayed long in one hospital; she liked a change of environment, and who the hell cared about promotion? You could have a good time by keeping on the move—good nurses were always wanted—the hospitals and the nursing-homes just couldn't find enough efficient girls for the jobs—Margie never had any bother getting placed, and they usually pleaded with her to stay on when she announced that she was going on to another hospital. You could work up quite an imposing list of useful friends, acquaintances, important patients, by keeping on the move. This time she was considering a London job—that rich City man who was at Brantling the previous summer had made her an interesting proposition—she'd always wanted a flat of her own, and she didn't have to sit around all day and be entertaining all night—it was just by way of being an address where he knew he could reach her when he felt they ought to go out and have a bit of dinner somewhere. It was quite a favourable offer; it had distinctly good angles to it, and it was worth considering, always assuming that nothing better materialized meanwhile. Of course, it was made before Mike Mahoon arrived as a patient, and, of course, before Arthur Lane came.

The thought of Arthur made Margie hurry along to see her new pet. He was sitting up in bed looking rather sorry for himself when she entered Room Seven.

"And how's my favourite racing motorist tonight?" she inquired, giving him what Grant, the Canadian girl, called 'the business'.

"I feel pretty awful," he said.

"You'll be all right when you've finished puking up the gas," Margie told him.

"You do say the sweetest things!"

"So they tell me!" Margie replied. "My name, by the way, is Margery."

"Thanks—nothing like being frank!"

"What does that mean?—I thought your name was Arthur!"

"It is—but skip it."

"Are you being sarcastic?"

"No—unless I don't know my own mind!" Arthur replied.

"What's the matter, don't you like me?"

"You certainly don't waste much time!"

"What do you mean?" Margie looked annoyed.

"No offence—I like people to be honest."

"Don't you like women?"

"They have their moments."

"I didn't know you were so conceited."

"You seem determined to misunderstand me."

"You seem determined to make me," Margie flashed back. "I was going to read to you later, but now I don't think I'll bother you, you're——"

But she was not able to complete her pronouncement on Arthur. There was a tap on the door and Arthur called out: "Come in!" and stopped her.

Duffy peered round the door, and, reporter-like, tried to sense what sort of a reception he would receive.

"Hallo—glad to see you're better! Hallo, Nurse!"

"What are you doing in here?" Margie asked, belligerently.

"I'm riding a green bicycle," Duffy replied.

"Well, you can't do it here—Mr. Lane's too sick to see visitors."

"Oh, that's all right—how do you do?"

"My name's Duffield—I look quite harmless, but I am bound to confess I'm a journalist—hateful, isn't it?" Duffy remarked.

"Now you can't come in here asking Mr. Lane a lot of silly questions!" Margie said, trying to bustle him out.

"Madam," said the somewhat undersized Duffy, drawing himself up and staring solemnly at her, "the *Gazette* does not ask silly questions!"

Arthur laughed. "That's all right, Nurse——"

"Well, if you want to get tired——" she began.

"Don't forget you're going to read to me!" Arthur added, with a slight grin. Margie glared at him and left the two men alone.

"Purely a social visit," Duffy began, "though, of course, if you have a story——"

"Afraid not—starting back from here at dawn and I just had the misfortune to hit an old lady——"

"No 'story' in the fact that you were leaving at dawn?"

"Not leaving a lady's boudoir, if that's what you mean," Arthur replied. "Of course, I haven't any idea what the old lady was doing—perhaps she's a cat burglar!"

"Unfortunately not," Duffy told him. "I've seen the good lady—it appears she always gets up at that hour——"

"Horrible thought!"

"Yes. She's a char at one of the sea-front hotels—she's older than God, has a sense of humour and likes going to the cinema. Her favourite star is Lutina Bell."

"It didn't take you long to get the facts!"

"We poor maligned journalists have to eat, you know."

"Have a grape," suggested Arthur.

"Thanks, I will," Duffy popped one into his mouth. "I love the

skins; I hope you don't mind," he explained, and then, with his mouth full, enquired: ". . . I suppose—the person who sent these grapes. . . . I couldn't announce your engagement or anything?"

Arthur did not laugh; this time he gave Duffy a wry grin. "Sorry, I still have to disappoint you," he said.

"Pity—pity! Let me know if I am boring you, and I'll get the hell out," said Duffy.

There was the sound of female voices raised in anger in the next room. Arthur looked surprised. Duffy sighed.

"Someone objecting to the removal of their appendix?" ventured Arthur with a smile.

"No—that's the Bon Dieu's gift to Society—Cynthia Leftcart-Spratling," Duffy told him.

Arthur's smile faded; he said: "Oh yes—I've met her—she was at the last Donington Grand Prix."

"Spratters does not get on with little Margie," Duffy continued.

"And who is 'little Margie'?"

"Little Margie is that bouncing nurse who tried to turn me out just now."

"Oh yes—stupid of me—she told me her name was Margie."

"Margie is a gal," said Duffy, "who stays not upon her going but gets cracking at once!"

"A formidable person."

"Quite. Have you, by chance, any money?"

Arthur looked surprised. "We've changed the subject rather suddenly, haven't we?"

"On the contrary," Duffy continued. "You see, Margie has a passion for finance—frenzied finance. She—er—she also 'collects' celebrities!"

"Thanks for the tip," said Arthur. "Even if I wasn't penniless, I doubt if I rate as a celebrity—I imagine film stars and——" There was a resounding bang as someone slammed the door of Room Six. Duffy made a mock gesture of horror. "The poor patients!" he said.

In Miranda Stewart's room, standing indignant and breathless, and struggling into a very smart and expensive dressing-gown, was Cynthia Leftcart-Spratling.

Miranda looked surprised to see her, but smiled weakly and greeted her: "Hallo!"

"I'm so sorry if I've disturbed you. My name's Cynthia Leftcart-Spratling," said Cynthia, her bosom heaving in righteous indignation. She tossed her red head in the direction of the door. "That Night Nurse bitch——"

"The pretty one?"

"Yes——"

"I'm so glad you feel that way about her," said Miranda. "She was perfectly beastly to me when I came in last night."

"She's a little swine," said Cynthia with feeling. "The Day Sister said I could get up tonight—and Ella—that's the nice little nurse who's in charge of the day crowd—well, she said you might be well enough to see visitors for a moment or two—and I thought you might like someone to come in, and I was frightfully bored with my room—and then when that cow came on duty——"

"I know," said Miranda, cutting in sympathetically and stopping the tirade.

"—So—well—I ruddy well came in, anyway. And I won't stay

'cos I can see you're feeling awful—but—well, the whole thing's a bore—isn't it? And if you want any books or things—just let me know—and if you'd like me to come in—well, you can bang on the wall—and that'll be a sign—and to hell with that confounded Night Nurse!"

"Thanks," said Miranda, weakly. "It's awfully good of you."

"Not a bit—glad to. Expect your people'll be in later."

"Yes—or in the morning."

"I've got a gang coming up tomorrow—rather a bore——"

"It's rather fun—when it's all over—isn't it?"

"Is it? Yes, I suppose so."

"Did you know Arthur Lane, the racing motorist, is in Seven? He had a crash at dawn this morning—I heard them bring him down. I once saw him drive at Brooklands. He took the most fearful risks."

"Yes—I've seen him——" said Cynthia. She paused. "Well, I'll be popping in—cheerho—it's all rather a bore, isn't it?" she repeated; it was her favourite expression; it also hid her real feelings. She made her way down to Room Seven.

Nurse Trimmings and her assistant were not in the corridor, so Cynthia tapped on the door. Arthur said: "Come in."

Duffy had gone, and Arthur was attempting to sleep. He looked up, not at all surprised to see her. That was typical of Arthur.

"Hallo, Arthur," she said.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THEY LOOKED AT ONE ANOTHER FOR A MOMENT WITHOUT SPEAKING, and then, a little too brightly, Cynthia remarked: "Well, I suppose you'd call this Fate!"

"If you think I smashed myself up because I heard you were here, you're crazy!" Arthur remarked.

"There was a time——"

"Ah; there was a time!"

They paused again, taking stock of one another. Cynthia was always pale with too much lipstick smeared badly over her mouth ("Darling, I simply can't put on a mouth"), and her large green-grey eyes, made greener by the carrot shade of her hair, stared at you. . . . You excused her because you imagined she must be short-sighted; no one could stare in that manner, not on purpose. She was tall and beautifully figured, and, though you could see her prototype at Long-champs Race Course or Lord's on the occasion of the Eton and Harrow, with Cynthia you were conscious that the mantle of boredom which so many of her class affected clothed only an interior vacuum, clothed, in her case, a creature who was, and would be, world without end, a vividly active, inquisitive, vital woman. A woman, not necessarily intelligent or studious, or even valuable; a woman not even with common sense or good maternal qualities, but a woman, in herself, sufficiently a woman to be judged for that alone. Cynthia 'teemed' with womanhood, and that, in her case, with her background, her breeding, her allure and her very being, was enough for most men. It had been enough for Arthur Lane, oh, but quite enough, thank you!

Returning his gaze, she could not help smiling. In his splints and bandages and with that blob on his nose he looked quite grotesque.

"You remind me of the advert. for Michelin Tyres!"

"If you had said the Invisible Man you were entitled to a free seat at the next operation—I promised it to the tenth person who made the crack."

"Darling, I'm not that obvious, I hope?"

"I doubt if you were ever obvious," he replied. "I have a feeling that even your birth wasn't 'obvious'—even to your mother."

"You are going to be obscure and indelicate, so we will conclude with a remark that should have come first, but . . ." she said, slowly walking round the room and pausing to pick up any objects that did not take her fancy but gave her something to do with her hands, ". . . that is, of course, how are you, Arthur dear?"

"I like the 'dear'," he said. She shook her head, and the silky red strands slipped, as was their custom, over one green eye. "Listen, Cyclops," he continued, but she looked at the mirror and poked a not-too-healthy tongue at his reflection.

"None of your Winchester education here, my lad—all that's past," she said.

"I'd have you know I was king of the socialists at Winchester——"

"I like 'King' of the Socialists—quaint," she remarked, "it's certainly better than all that Cyclops stuff."

"You know, Cynth," he said, "there must come a time in your life, in the twenty-four hours that make up your life, I mean—when you take down your back hair and stop pretending to pretend."

At this, Cynthia lifted her hair back and held it up at the top of her head.

"Don't tell me," he said quickly. "Rex Whistler's 'Caroline'!"

She smiled, and let her hair fall back; it dropped and washed against her high cheek-bones like a sudden spring tide. . . . Cynthia, the tigerish quality of that womanly woman!

"Go on . . ." she said, "you're getting profound."

"I was saying——"

"Attempting to say," she corrected him.

"I was attempting to *find out* when it was you stopped playing and became yourself; maybe just before you go to sleep," he hazarded.

"That," Cynthia replied quickly, "coming from you, my dear, is a little foolish."

"Did we—sleep?"

"La-la, what sort of conversation is this?" she asked.

They stopped fooling.

"The gang will be down tomorrow, visitors. . . ."

"Oh yes."

"I've been here *all* the time," she said, and turned from the mirror to look at him, in person, to see if he comprehended.

"You mean the——"

"I never went to the other place."

"I see."

"And this——?"

"I've been in for my tonsils. They ought to have been forked out, anyway."

Arthur laughed. "Did it hurt?"

"Not as much as—the other."

They were silent for a moment again.

"I'd like to say I am sorry, but that would be feminine of me," Arthur said.

Cynthia turned away again to the mirror. "Why do all men with feminine qualities hide them?"

"Women despise them," Arthur said.

"I disagree," she said.

"The girls I've known do," Arthur replied.

"I said 'women'," Cynthia corrected him.

"That still stands!"

"Funny—but all you tough men have feminine streaks—there's a Freudian thought somewhere there."

"Well, if it's there, you haven't found it!"

"Maybe I'm being a bit muddly!"

"Maybe is good! You didn't really want me to say I was sorry that—that the other hurt you? If it had been for me I would have, maybe. . . ."

"No, I didn't really want you to say you were sorry.—I know you too well—just as you know me too well. We say things, and we both know that we are thinking quite the reverse," Cynthia said. "I will put it another way. You would have been glad that it hurt had it been for you—glad because it would be a glad hurt."

"Oh, my God—that's far too involved," Arthur replied.

"Not really," she said, going to the door.

"About tomorrow—won't it look funny you and I being here at the same time?"

"Yes—a little——"

"Why the hell did you come to Brantling?" Arthur asked.

"Out of the way. Besides, Nick Carlton operates here twice a week—Nick's been the family carver for years—that was logical enough."

"Yes."

"What about you?"

"I've been racing a Mario."

"Oh yes—you won."

"The Mario won—I just put my foot on the old heater."

"What happened—you didn't crash. Girl in the next room is quite a fan of yours—she told me."

"Hit an old char—she's all right."

"Good. Well, I'll think up a reason for our being here—at the same time," Cynthia said. "Pity we didn't know before; we could have taken a double room—and saved the expense."

"Aren't you the little comic!" said Arthur. "Be a good girl and go now. I'm sleepy."

"All right, darling. Aren't hospitals a bore!"

Arthur grunted. "Oh—what about Robert?"

"He's O.K."

"But—where?"

"London."

"Uh-huh," Arthur grunted.

"Sleep well, Poppet," she said.

But Arthur did not sleep. Perhaps, as Cynthia had remarked, Fate had decreed their meeting at the Brantling General Hospital. Arthur had, he assured Cynthia at their last rendezvous, gone out of her life for good; and he fully intended to keep to that. Not that he did not regret such a move; such a departure. There would only be

one Cynthia in his lifetime. He had hoped that there would only be, for her, one Arthur. But in this he was mistaken. There were qualities that he alone had, for her, but she was, unlike him, not so completely monogamatic—and if he had but realized that fact, their happiness and future would not have been so suddenly and vitally cut off with that finality which Arthur insisted was necessary—for decency. Arthur, in a way, was so utterly childlike and early-Victorian in his outlook that Cynthia had decided that he must, of necessity, have been an only child and just where he had received that detached, painfully obvious toughness and cynicism into which it was far more difficult to probe. Arthur's denunciation was that Cynthia's actions were 'modern' and 'polygamous'—in themselves a Victorian denunciation. Nor could he, in that determined, obstinate, it's-no-use-arguing way of his, realize that there was a great part of Cynthia that was entirely his. That, in their love, for indeed they were, or had been, in love, there was a mood or feeling between them which would never, could never, be replaced even by another love; say the love of Cynthia and Robert. For Cynthia was, and had been—Cynara-like—faithful to Arthur . . . in her fashion.

It was a fashion that Arthur considered to be pretty lousy. Cynthia's conduct was, in his opinion, deplorable. Not that she had ever been underhand. Always in her way, the way she depreciated anything she did; the way she made light of this and that, the way she *pretended*; she had acted her desire for Robert's body quite honestly. When Arthur thought of this, he would see only blackness for a moment, like that blind-spot an aviator receives on a sudden sharp turn. No one could do that to Arthur and not mean to hurt him, not if they understood him. And so it boiled down to an issue between them, neither wishing to admit that, perhaps, neither really understood the other yet neither of them was particularly selfish in their love.

And so Arthur lay and thought. The 'split' had occurred in the south of France where he had been racing—and they had met once in London—for he was the only one she could call on. What she said was so utterly novelettish, so obvious that he thought, for a moment, that she was acting—as usual. But there was no acting within, that was elemental and natural a happening. And, of course, he helped. And he and Robert lunched and said practically nothing, for they were unable to understand Cynthia's seemingly dual personality, but they appreciated each other's worth.

Afterwards, racing up and down the country and abroad, without her on the beach at Le Touquet and not sitting by her side at the Cannes Casino and feeling in vain for her hair on hot nights in San Sebastian, and lunching with various 'Pretties' at Maxim's in Paris or dancing with actresses made him lonely and miserable and surprised; but, it seemed, one always got one good sock between the eyes—some men got it through drink and others through work and others through disappointments and others through bad luck—and, of course, not a few, like Arthur, because of love of a beautiful woman.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"HALLO, BABE!" SAID MIKE. "DID YOU MISS ME TODAY?"

"Maybe," Margie answered coyly.

"Ah, gwan, why don't-ja ever gimme a break?" he asked her. "You know how I could go for you, Babe!"

"You men are all the same."

"Lissen, there's only one Mike Mahoon, Margie—an' that's me. Say, I don't seem to be able to get past second base with you. What's the matter—you scared of the Matron?"

"Now stop it, Mike."

"Ah—you like it. Don't gimme that old how-dare-you stuff!"

"Stop it! Later—maybe. It's too dangerous now."

Reluctantly Mike let her go. He shook his head sorrowfully, pushed out his aggressive jaw and remarked, in the hope of a contradiction: "I dunno, maybe I'm slippin'?"

"You do all right," Margie told him, as she straightened her blouse.

"Well, what did ya do today, Honey? Spend all day thinking of your little palsie-walsie?"

"P'raps."

"Who was you with—some big palooka, I suppose."

Indeed, Margie had been out with 'some big palooka'—a boy called Syd who was in charge of the switchback at the Fun Fair. He had the widest shoulders—and they were all his, no padding—he wore a tight, open-neck shirt and he'd cut off the sleeves. His face and hands were tanned a deep golden, and the sun had bleached his hair. His complexion, through being out of doors most of the year, was ruddy, and he was clear-skinned and plenty tough. A bit uncouth, certainly, but he had had his eye on Margie for some time now. She remembered how contemptuous he had been of Joe when Joe refused to take her a second trip on the switchback. He'd grinned at her as if to say: "I'd take you up, my proud beauty—trip after trip." H'm! Margie had mused—I'll bet you would! She had planned to spend just one day with Syd. Syd had nothing except a marvellous body, and she couldn't waste much time on him; except just to add another scalp to her body-belt. Yes, she'd go out once with Syd—just for the experience. She had conveniently forgotten a date to go to the pictures with an intense chemist's assistant who was mad about her, and had wandered along to the Fun Fair and allowed herself to be picked up by Syd. He left another boy in charge of the switchback and took her all round the side-shows. Everyone knew Syd; it was "Wotcher, Syd!" "Not bad, there, Syd!" and "Nice work, Syd-boy!" from everyone as Margie and Syd strolled through the fair-grounds. She had free 'go's' on everything, from coco-nut shies to ringing the chocolates—the man made it easy for her to win the chocolates, whether because he was a friend of Syd's or afraid of him was a moot point. Margie was glad she won, firstly because she had tried so often to win a box of chocolates that she had told herself it wasn't possible, it was a fake, and secondly because she had to have something tangible to take back to the hospital, just a little something to show that the day wasn't a complete waste of time. Of course, she had several bruises, but that didn't count. They'd gone into the 'Threepenny Spookie', and in the dark Syd had crushed her in his powerful arms, and, for a brief moment, she found actual occurrence as satisfactory as anticipation—which so seldom happened. Golly, but Syd was primitive! She was happy for the rest

of the day—even letting the passionate chemist (who had waited all day for her) take her out to tea and cream buns before she came on duty.

Now, as she looked down at Mike's hard face and the over-sized jaw slightly off-centre as he grinned up at her, she realized that he was waiting for some sort of communication. She started: "Huh?"

"Snap out of it—I said who've ya bin out with—making me feel jealous, eh? Quit stalling!" said Mike.

Margie smiled, as she hoped, annoyingly. She was no mug; she certainly wasn't going to say that it was only a Fun Fair.

"Aw, c'mon!" pleaded Mike.

"A rich banker!" Margie replied.

Mike pretended not to be put out by this. Margie was pleased to see that he was, though—and pleased that the idea of a 'rich banker' had, apparently, been a success. She had, for some time now, wanted to say she'd been out with a rich banker. It was an expression she had learned from the American films; it seemed that in the United States all the girls in the movies were taken out and got into the 'Big Dough' and acquired 'Class' by taking-up with rich bankers. Not just bankers, mind you, but rich bankers.

Mike looked a bit crestfallen, but not for long. "What about a lil kiss before you go, Honey—huh?"

But that, thought Margie, would have, after Syd, something of an anti-climax.

"Why, Mr. Mahoon, this is a hospital!"

"Waal, Babe, every hospital has a Dispensary."

"What has that got to do with it?"

"Waal, you can dispense with a lil kiss right now!"

Margie laughed.

"Gag I once wrote for a vaudeville act," Mike explained, with a grin, and waited expectantly.

"I hope you had more success with it than here!" Margie replied. "Toodle-oo!"

Mike scowled in annoyance. "Come on back, Babe."

"Later," said Margie.

She called to her Junior, and started on the rounds. Mr. Gidney was affable, well-mannered and as boring as usual. He told her that they were allowing him to get up into a chair in a day or so. Who cared?

Mrs. Drawbridge might have been a sphinx. Lutina Bell was asleep. Boy, but how deeply that film favourite could sleep! She was pretty in a doll-like way. But she was, as Mike Mahoon had once expressed it of Margie when she had been out on the tiles for a long period, "wearing too much jewellery". When she asked what he meant, he had replied, childishly pleased: "Lotsa rings under your eyes!"

The Stewart girl was dozing, and had come through the appendix all right. Margie could see that the girl had taken quite a dislike to her, and she smiled inwardly, 'Silly little cry-baby!' she thought.

Cynthia Leftcart-Spratling was back in her room, and was reading Dorothy Parker's *Here Lies*—nor did she take the slightest notice of Trimmings or the Junior when they entered. Cynthia had, in the words of the Upper Classes, told Margie what she could do. The words were, to Margie's surprise, the same as those used by the Lower Classes, though, said by the Lady Cynthia, they assumed even more vividness. The dispute ended with Cynthia walking out of her room and leaving Margie in it.

Arthur Lane lay with his eyes closed, and he did not open them when Margie entered, although he did say: "Hallo, Nurse."

"And how's the famous racing driver now?" Margie Trimmins inquired.

Arthur groaned.

Margie looked at her colleague, then at Arthur. "What's the matter—are you in pain?" she asked him.

"No, I'm all right—but please don't call me the 'famous racing driver'—you sound like a newsreel."

"I've seen you on the newsreel—quite like a film star," Margie said. "Now, come along, that's a good person, we can't do all the work." They began, with Arthur's help, to hoist him further up in the bed.

"You know," continued Margie happily, "you're a bit like Spencer Tracy."

"Yes, a little bit, very little," Arthur said, and added: "You ought to have been a manicurist."

"Why—do you think I'd be a success?"

"Well, you talk enough to be."

"Do manicurists talk a lot? I'm surprised you know anything about it—you don't look the type who has his nails 'done'. Let me see them."

"Oh Lord—I should have said 'barber', I suppose," Arthur said.

"When are you going to take me out in that scarlet racer of yours?" Margie asked as they started to apply Arthur's evening dressings.

"Tonight, of course."

Margie flashed a deadly look at him—a look that she had once seen paralleled on the screen—the look a fascinating Eurasian had given to a white man in the tropics, and, quickly, the film people had 'cut to' a rabbit enchanted by a cobra. It was ever so clever. That was the look she had in mind, at that moment.

"When do these famous doctors come 'round?" Arthur asked.

"Tomorrow morning, and we want you looking your best."

"What the hell for—are they going to propose?"

Margie's assistant giggled so much at this that she had to be admonished.

"Now what would you like me to read to you, after we've done the suppers?"

"You haven't a laundry list or a telephone directory?" Arthur asked earnestly. The Junior began to giggle again.

"You're not as funny as all that," Margie told him. "My Junior's a bit weak-minded."

"Oh—I was beginning to think I was pretty good," Arthur answered.

"You and that Mike Mahoon make a good pair!"

"Who's Mike Mahoon?"

"The famous song writer—he's in Three."

"I hope it keeps fine for him."

"Well, what'll I bring—an evening paper?"

"No, thank you—just a nice big bromide."

"I think you want to stay in here for ever."

"I can think of some less desirable places."

"Come on, Junior—we'll come back later."

"If I'm asleep, Nurse, don't wake me, will you?"

"I'll try not to," Margie Trimmins replied.

Outside in the corridor they met the Night Sister, who was going the rounds.

"Oh, Nurse Trimmings—about Miss—er—Smith in Two—don't wake her if she wants to sleep, best thing in the world."

"Yes, Sister," Margie replied, and thought, 'What the hell do you think I'm going to do—play the gramophone in her ear?'

"No one knows about her, I imagine that——"

"Oh no, there've been no questions, Sister."

"Good. Make sure that Mr. Duffield doesn't get wind of this—I once had a cousin on a newspaper," she added, and Margie, waiting for some profound statement, or at any rate perhaps a personal anecdote, was left high and dry. Sister had receded. Margie poked out her tongue at her and placed her tray on top of the one the Junior was carrying. "Silly old bag!" she complained. "Take these back, will you, Ducks? I'm going on to the balcony for a cigarette—give me a call if anything happens," Margie said. Her Junior bit her lip. Sometimes Margie Trimmings was a bit too much; she wished she worked for Ella Logan on the day staff. Ella was a dear. Everyone said so, and she'd be promoted one day. There was no denying that Trimmings was a good nurse, but she was a little tartar—up to all the dodges. One day, of course, she'd be found out. Then she'd cop it. The Junior walked back along the corridor. All the day staff were going to a dance on the Pier; she wished she was there. Even Daphne Short, the day staff Probationer, was going. This night business was rotten fun.

On the Pier the dance was in full swing. The hall was pack-jammed with young people; dance fans, jitterbugs, shop girls, motor mechanics, young people on holiday, hot-dog vendors, maids, soldiers, cockle and Brantling pink-rock sellers, chauffeurs, hairdressers, errand boys and fried-fish shop girls.

There was a very loud and extremely good jazz band; they were dressed in white dinner jackets and they loved playing, and they knew they were good . . . didn't they copy Tommy Dorsey down to the last clarinet? There was a soda-pop fountain, and little tables for drinks and a bit of quick hand-holding, and on gala nights there were balloons. And almost everyone was happy and enjoying themselves, most of all, Ella Logan.

Ella, in a dress she had copied from an old *Vogue* looked hot, happy and quite helpless in the large flowered material she had chosen. Her big clear eyes were shining and so, too, was her nose. With her was Nurse Jenkins, Eton-cropped, rather severe-looking, but sensibly in black and no attempts at contrasting colours. Nurse Grant, cheerfully chewing gum and answering back wisecrack for wisecrack, was taking careful stock of the eligible and flirtatious young males. Her horoscope had told her to look out for a ginger-headed man, and all day she had taken time off to pop down to the public and casualty wards to see if any had come in with hair of that colour. Nurse Morgan, in an appalling dress which she amply filled, had foolishly removed her spectacles, and thus proved that she was slightly cross-eyed, a fact of which one could not be definitely sure whilst they were on. She was dying to dance, and made moon-calf looks at most of the young men who were standing about, hands in pockets, but there were, alas, far too many more attractive female species present, and up till now, Morgan had been out of luck. Evelyn Charteris looked very attractive in apple green, and Nurse Morgan, who was generous enough to admit it, could not help regretting that Charteris had joined them. She was so

obviously the 'pick' of the bunch, though little Daphne Short looked very sweet, if a bit mannish, in a light grey tailor-made coat and skirt.

All of the nurses kept moving around at a slow pace, on the outskirts of the dancing; this ensured that they could see everyone, and, of course, be seen. Their own men-folk had not yet arrived. They were part of the team and some supporters of the Brantling Hockey eleven. They had played the Doctors on the last match of the year on the Hospital ground, and had been severely trounced by Darlington Breeze's boys, but were mollified by a huge tea and a large selection of clean, fresh-faced, nicely smelling nurses who served them, made them at home, and, to the more daring, agreed to a meeting at the Pier dance the following Saturday. This was the big day.

"There they are!" squealed Morgan excitedly, as the slightly self-conscious hockeyites hove into view.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

MARGIE TRIMMINS LISTENED TO THE MUSIC WHICH WAS BEING BROADCAST that night from the Brantling Pier Dance Saloon, and drummed furiously on the table to express her annoyance. She sat in Sister's room with her feet up on a chair and her shoes off. It was sickening, simply sickening—being on the night staff completely ruined her life. She loved dancing, and a tea-dance was a poor substitute for the real thing. Dancing was essentially a night-time occupation—for Margie Trimmings; for her, dancing was, in most cases, the preliminary holds that led up to a show of affection later. Margie did not dance just for the exercise or because she enjoyed the rhythm.

Idly, as sulkily, she pulled at her lower lip, she wondered if she would have enjoyed dancing with Syd, the Fun Fair boy—of course that was a silly thought now, because they had got past that stage. Gosh, but Syd was well-built—and so brown. . . . He had held her so tight she wanted to scream in pain and delight in that dark 'Three-penny Spookie'. Odd—but in spite of her principles, she wanted to see him again—wanted to verify for herself, to reassure herself that he had been as satisfactory as she now, in looking back, thought him to be. How silly, when he had nothing—nothing at all with him to give a girl a good time—except, of course, himself. . . .

Margie stopped drumming on the table, glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece (a gift to the Sister from a North Country hospital on her departure after five years' service), and, with a petulant gesture of annoyance, realized that it was time to have a quick walk round the wards. Those lucky day nurses—on the Pier having no end of fun—yes, it was high time she moved from Brantling, she thought, though, at the moment, there was a lot to be said for the place. It wasn't often they got such an interesting batch of patients—Mike Arthur Lane and Lutina Bell—all valuable 'contracts'; all people who might be 'useful' later on. She made a swift survey of the semi-private wards, and passed on quickly down the corridor to have a look at Lutina. She had not yet got over her excitement at Lutina being at Brantling General,

and, more especially, her valuable knowledge of the star's illness. Perhaps, who knows, maybe later, when Lutina went back to Hollywood, Margie could deliver an ultimatum—either I get a free trip out there or else I tell all. Oh, yes, she'd be fired from the hospital, and perhaps barred by the Medical Association, but what the hell would that matter then? Once out in Hollywood she might meet one of the big stars, and who knows? She had as much charm as some of these women stars—even in comparing herself with Lutina, she did not compare so very unfavourably.

Lutina was only dozing when Margie peered into Room Two. She awoke when she heard the door creak, and she blinked in that direction and asked: "Who is it?"

"Only the Night Nurse."

"Oh—who?"

"The Night Nurse."

There was a pause whilst this information was received by Lutina and finally seeped home.

"Oh yeah, yeah. That goddammed hospital. Bin dreamin'—thought I was staying with Jan."

"With Jan?"

"Yeah, my Big Moment."

"Kipura?"

"No—Sebastian."

"Jan Sebastian—is he your boy-friend, Miss Bell?—He's nice," Margie said, talking in a whisper, and moving up to the bed and sitting on the edge of it.

"Nice!" Lutina replied contemptuously. "He's the best goddam' thing that ever happened to me. Sa-ay, you know something—I used to 'go' for the clever guys, you know, the arty-crafty kind."

"Oh yes?" Margie said politely.

"Sure I did. Me, with all my beauty and loveliness," said Lutina, contemptuously, of herself. "No foolin'—I used to go around all the time with the clever guys. Gave me a chance to say smart things. Then I suddenly got wise. I admit I had a lil' drinkie and it sorta made me get to thinkin'."

"Yes?"

"Uh-huh! I suddenly saw—it was a party given by that old rogue Glaubspiel, you know, big Producer? Well, there he was, Jan Sebastian, tall, wavy-headed and s-o-o-o beautiful. Yep. Like a goddam' Greek god—though I believe he's Hungarian. An' I said to myself, that's a man! Yep, I did! I said lookit here, Mabel—my name ain't reely Lootina."

"No?"

"Naw—not reely.—So I said 'Ferchrisake, Mabel, whadya go around with all these writers and pansies and all those guys—ain't it sorta time you gotcha self a real hunk o' man?' And I figgered out maybe I was right!" Lutina continued. Margie thought of Syd. There was a lot of sense in what Lutina had to say.

"Yes, sir," continued the world-famous actress. "An' at that moment, I wanta tell ya, Jan looked round—sorta as if by instinct—an' well, we just looked, and—Land sakes! there you are—there we were—bingo! We were in love. S'wonderful, ain't it? Gee, but I'm thirsty—say—you gotta drink? A nice big Scotch, huh?"

Margie went over to the washbasin and poured a glassful of water into the tooth mug. "Here!" she said. Lutina took a gulp of water.

and quickly spat it out on to the pillow. "Hey!" she said. "What are you giving me?"

"Sh! You'll wake everybody."

"You betcha I will!"

"Please! Do be quiet."

"Who—me? Sa-ay who the hell do you think you are talking to?"

Lutina asked loudly.

"I'm sorry, Miss Bell, but really——" implored Margie.

"Nuts to you, dearie! Lissen, do I get a drink or do I? Those baskets, they ship me to England knowing that Jan can't break his contract. They try and split us, do they? Damn 'em—I'll fix 'em—fix 'em good. Say, Honey, where's that drink?"

"I'm sorry," said Margie, "but Sister said . . ."

"Sister? Whose Sister? You got a sister? Say, I've got a sister—two sisters. Yep—and a brother—ain't seen 'em in years. My dad was an elevator man at the Victory-Regal. Yep—steady job but no dough in it—no dough anyway 'xcept in movies. Where the hell's that *DRINK*?"

"Shush—please, Miss Bell, I'll have to get the Night Sister if you don't——"

"Sure, get the Sister—I'll 'phone mine—we'll have a party. Now, lemme see, what was the 'phone number of those folk next door—lemme see. . . . No, I know, you get Gaylord on the 'phone; he'll bring over a load of drinks—'nough to float a battleship. Now come on, baby, I ain't taking no more apple-sauce from you—give—come on—give!"

Margie, usually so cool, so self-possessed, was in a cold sweat. There was only one thing to do, and that was to give Lutina an injection; she had instructions in case of any difficulty to ring for the Night Sister, but if she left Lutina now, Lutina might make a frightful din, and then the secret might be out and she'd be blamed and the time wasn't quite ripe yet for——

"Am I going to get a reel drink?" Lutina demanded.

Then Margie had an idea. Moistening her lips, she asked in an attempt at a casual voice: "What's it worth?"

"Whassat?"

"What will you give me if I get you a drink?" Margie asked

"What kind of a gyp is this?"

"If you want a drink it'll cost you a lot!" gulped out Margie.

"Is sat so?"

"Yes. I'll be running an awful risk. If I'm caught I'll be fired.

—You're not to have any, you see," Margie explained quickly.

"Oh!"

"So you see, it's worth it if you really want it——"

"If I really want it." Come on, don't stall, get me a drink, will yah, there's a good girl. Sure, I'll pay. I'll pay, I got lots-a dough. Get me a drink, never mind the cost."

Margie's eyes gleamed in the darkness. "Right-o," she whispered. "But it'll cost you——" she paused, then quickly said: "It'll cost you twenty pounds."

"Yeah? O.K.! O.K.! How much is that, anyway? Twen'y pounds, lemme see, five bucks a one pound—an'—never mind, get me it, will you please?"

"Where's your bag?"

"Bag?"

"Where's the purse with the money?"

"Oh, I dunno. Come on, now——"

Margie switched on the table lamp and then went to the chest of drawers in the corner and searched for Lutina's bag. Sure enough, there it was, and it was positively stuffed with bank-notes; its inside looked like a too-well-filled stomach—it was almost indecently full of bank-notes. Resisting the obvious temptation to helping herself in order that there should be no 'inquests' later on, Margie made Lutina count out and give her the twenty pounds, and then she replaced the bag. Of course, there was almost enough money to take the lot and do a bunk, but that meant severing a lot of ties, Mike for example, and that racing motorist and, perhaps, a chance of a trip to Hollywood. No, she was doing the right thing, yes, a rather clever scheme had presented itself to her sly brain.

Quietly she tiptoed into the next room. Mike was fast asleep. Very carefully she went to his clothes cupboard and took from the back one of his bottles of brandy. Margie had smuggled these in for him a few nights ago, for they were in the habit occasionally of taking a little midnight drink together. Stealthily she closed the cupboard and made her way across the room and back into Lutina's.

"Have you got it?" Lutina asked. For answer, Margie held up the bottle of brandy. Lutina stretched out her arms and Margie gave it to her. "Oh boy—oh boy!" said Lutina. "Am I glad to see you!" She patted the bottle affectionately. "Here ya, open yer up quickly, will you, that's a gal!" she said, handing the bottle back to Margie. "—An' ferchrisake don't drop it now!" she cautioned.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"BUT WHERE DID SHE GET IT?" ASKED NURSE JENKINS, AS THE DAY staff crowded around Nurse Morgan.

"Well," explained Morgan excitedly, "it seems she crept into Mr. Mahoon's room and stole it!"

"Fan my brow!" Nurse Grant exclaimed. "That dame's like a water diviner—only for water she substitutes liquor! Can you imagine, nosing the stuff out like that!"

Nurse Morgan, once again thrilled at being the first with the news, was 'full of it'.—Lutina Bell had been discovered by Margie Trimmins in a state of advanced intoxication when she went on her rounds. It was incredible, but somehow or other Lutina had 'got to' a bottle of brandy in Mike's room, and she'd put most of it down in between the times the Night Nurse took her hourly look at the patients in the Private Ward. Of course, the whole thing was being kept frightfully quiet, but the trouble, the great difficulty, was that Lutina had now become extremely tiresome; she was quarrelsome, noisy, and generally obstreperous. Even at that very moment the Sister, together with sundry officials from the C-K-L, the company Physician and the Brantling Junior M.O., were holding a court of inquiry in Room Two. Lutina, her eyes as red as fire from drinking, glared hotly at the cool, placid

countenance of Margie Trimmings. "You goddam liar!" she said. "You goddam liar!"

Margie smiled in that superior way that made young men old, old men young and women want to spit right in her eye.

"You gave me the goddam stuff," shouted Lutina, "and why the hell shouldn't she? I'm not an invalid. I asked for it, and I paid for it *an'* I got it!"

"I'm sorry to have to contradict Miss Bell again, but I can only repeat," said Margie, in a quiet tone which contrasted with Lutina's high-pitched voice of rage, "I found Miss Bell with a half-finished bottle of brandy—I had no idea where she got it——"

"I paid you twenty bucks or pounds for it, you dirty little double-crossing——"

"—She was, I regret to say, extremely drunk, and I took the bottle away——" continued Margie.

"—You had a snifter yourself, you scheming bitch!"

"—And this morning, Mr. Mahoon said that his dressing-room cupboard was open, his clothes were strewn about and some drink was missing."

"Why didn't you notice Mr. Mahoon's cupboard was open when you went your rounds?" Sister inquired, but Margie Trimmings was in no way dismayed.

"Because, Sister," she said with superb unconcern, "the cupboard is behind the door. Mr. Mahoon is in the convalescent stage—as you know—and it is not necessary to go right into his room unless he especially wants anything."

"Well, may I be flayed in oil! You are the dirtiest little two-timing rat I've ever met!" shouted Lutina. "What sort of a frame-up is this? I'd have protected you—I wouldn't have given you away, you double-crossing——"

"Please, Miss Bell!" There were worried cries from the C-K-L Organization.

"Don't you 'please' me!" screamed Lutina. "I don't give a goddam who hears—I didn't travel six thousand miles to be put in a hospital—I've got a contract to make pictures, not sit on my fanny in some lousy English hospital—now you gimme my clothes *an'* let me get out of here!"

The noise Lutina was making could be heard quite distinctly down the passage. Duffy, who had been reading, sensing a 'story', quickly got out of his bed and, putting on his dressing-gown, padded out into the corridor in his bare feet. Outside Number Two room he was astonished to see that all the day staff were congregated in listening attitudes around the door. From within there came the sound of an irate female voice, a voice that was fierce, assertive, harsh, and certainly American.

"I said gimme my clothes or I'll scream the goddam hospital down!" threatened the voice. Duffy's eyebrows rose towards the bald space where his hair should be; he was about to ask the nurses for some information when, from behind him, striding at a fast pace, came Nick Carlton. It was obvious that he was in no mood for passing the time of day, so when he suggested abruptly "Mr. Duffield, I suggest that you should be in bed!" Duffy meekly agreed and pretended to return to Room A until 'Old Nick' had actually entered Room Two, then, as soon as the door closed, Duffy hurried along to the other end of the corridor and slipped out of sight by the balcony to await developments.

"What seems to be the trouble?" 'Old Nick' asked, looking pointedly

at Lutina, his nose creases dark and powerful as he concentrated his strong perusal on the famous star.

"What seems to be the trouble!" mimicked Lutina. "Get him! Lissen you—I'll repeat this for your benefit, whoever you are, an' after that the hell with it—I am a lil' drunk and I don't give a dam' and I am leaving this hospital——"

"Oh no, you're not!"

The reply was so swift and so unexpected that it stopped Lutina dead in the middle of her sentence.

"Wassat?"

"I said you were not!" repeated 'Old Nick'. There was a pause whilst the C-K-L Organization gulped and Sister looked at Margie Trimmings and smiled knowingly. 'Old Nick' was going to deal with Lutina.

"Oh, a wise guy, huh!" sneered Lutina. "Now lissen, Handsome, you just stick to your bottles of medicine and I'll stick to my bottles of rye an' we'll get along great. An' now, if someone will get my clothes I'll get out-a here."

"I said you will not be leaving yet!" 'Old Nick' repeated.

Lutina looked at him. So this was a challenge, was it? O.K. Lutina liked challenges. "We'll see," she said. "I am going to scream and I'm going to keep right on screaming until my clothes are brought here." And, suiting the action to the words, she opened the throat that had launched a thousand theme songs, and yelled lustily. . . . The noise set the old Jewish woman, who was convalescing, back at least a week, and awoke Mr. Gidney, who had dozed off to sleep again, in the next room. Nor did just one frightening bellow emanate from the Bell larynx, but a long, continuous series of blood-curdling yells. Above the noise, Nick Carlton's voice was heard authoritatively saying: "Leave me alone with Miss Bell, please!" Whereupon the cortège turned and made an attempt at a dignified exit, and the day nurses outside the door looked extremely foolish when it opened and they were discovered there.

Nick Carlton waited until the door closed. Eyeing him, Lutina continued to scream. To her surprise, Nick turned to the dressing-table and picked up one of her platinum and gold-backed hair brushes. 'If he uses my brush with that goo on his hair I'll throw something at him!' she thought. But, instead, with a cool determined tread, Nick, the hair brush in his right hand, walked over to the bed. "You've asked for this!" he said. Whereupon, to the utter astonishment of Lutina Bell, film star, he suddenly pulled her roughly by the arm towards him, then, sitting down on the bed, in a moment he had laid her across his knees and with her own hair brush promptly began to smack her backside as if she were a small child.

The screaming which had stopped as soon as Lutina found herself in an attitude of complete embarrassment, gave way, for a brief moment, to a shout—a plea for help. The various patients who were listening gasped or chilled with apprehension as they set mental pictures to the sound-track they could hear. Then, as the first blow descended, there was silence—save for the sound of metal on nude flesh—smack! smack! smack!

Later, in thinking it over, Lutina recalled that she had read about people being struck dumb with astonishment, and then it had happened to her—it actually had! When she realized that Nick Carlton was going to smack her, she shouted in the hope that the C-K-L contingent

would rush in and throw this Violator of sacred persons, this Assaulter of women, out of the hospital window. When she found herself across his knees and realized just how this tyrant proposed to chastise her, she stopped shouting, in amazement. When she realized, further, that her elegant forty-dollar nightdress had caught up, in the sudden jerk across the doctor's knees, exposing the twin half-moons that comprised the Bell posterior, she crimsoned in fury. When the first smack descended, she was numbed into silence. The horror of the situation, the embarrassment! There was she, one of the greatest film stars in Hollywood—in the world—having her bottom smacked just like Dad used to smack it years ago when she was a little girl in Minneapolis. The humiliation! It couldn't be happening, it couldn't. She'd got the heebie-jeebies—she was going nuts; the drink had finally caught up with her. Yet, if she was asleep, that wallop she was getting on the receiving end would surely have awakened her, and—ouch! Hell's bells, that was no dream. The crazy arrogant sonofagun was walloping hell out of her—lamming into Lutina Bell—the Lutina Bell—exactly as if—as if she were ten-year-old Mabel Beets! She couldn't believe it; she wanted to cry with shame and mortification and hurt and fury, and yet, while all those thoughts were surging through her mind, and she was feeling pain and anger and pique, a greater force, a greater power, was stunning it all with the realization that here, at long last was a man who was able to stop all the nonsense, all the wretched Lutina Bell wiles—a man who had succeeded where men, all men from Gaylord Alderdyce to Jan Sebastian, had failed throughout the years. It made you gasp. That's all—for the moment. Not a tear, not a shout, not a whimper, but a gasp. This was happening to me, Lutina Bell, film star! I am being spanked because I've been a naughty girl. . . . This is actually—

"There, Miss Bell. That's all for this morning. We'll send your breakfast up," she heard him saying, just as if he had diagnosed a sore throat. Matter-of-fact, impersonal, austere and withal a tinge of irony. The goddam nerve of the guy! "That's all for this morning!"—as if she could expect the same thing again after lunch. What kind of a gag was this? What did one do when someone completely and undeniably disarmed one? What could one do under such circumstances but lie on one's stomach and blush into the pillow and gulp and swallow and one re-lived those incredible few moments! An unknown man; tall, distinguished—the type Hollywood cast as a Doctor, walks calmly into a room where she's giving an exclusive and scared audience one of her best tantrum scenes, and solemnly proceeds to paddle the tar out of you—yep, to me! To Lutina Bell, the absolute incredulity of it. . . . Well, may I be flayed in oil! . . .

At the other end of the corridor, Duffy peered round cautiously and ducked back as Nick Carlton left Room Two and made his way down the corridor towards Sister's Room. Duffy, who had counted the smacks and showed surprise on his pleasant fat face, blew out his cheeks—a habit he had when he was putting two and two together—then, his mind made up, he started down the corridor towards Room Two. Reaching it without being discovered, he paused, made up his mind and, banging on the door, opening it before anyone inside could answer "Come in" (or "Stay out"), he entered. A hot-faced, wild-eyed young beauty raised her head from her pillow and glared. "Scram!" she said, as if her breath was vitriolic. Duffy scrambled. He had only just closed the door when Ella Logan came round the corner to calm

Mr. Gidney and tell all the other occupants of the private rooms that all was well and that no one had been murdered in Room Two—yet.

"Now, kiddie, whatever are you doing?" Ella asked, suspiciously anxious.

"Just been to see Arthur Lane," Duffy lied brazenly, and cheerfully. Ella Logan clucked and waited until he had proceeded on his way back to Room A, then she entered to reassure Mr. Gidney.

Duffy, en route back to his bed, passed the Sister's room, where, it seemed, a council of war was proceeding. His brow creased as he walked, and he blew out his cheeks in perplexity. "Well, I'm sure I've seen that booful face before," he said, partly to himself, but in a voice that was loud enough to be heard by plump Nurse Morgan who had stooped over to do up her shoe. She straightened up, thinking he referred to her anatomy, and withered Duffy with a look that, if it had been her way, should have aged him there and then in front of her eyes.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

IT WAS, PERHAPS, FORTUNATE THAT MR. AND MRS. STEWART DID NOT arrive to see their daughter at the time of Lutina's chastisement. Indeed, had they done so it is possible that they would have hired a private ambulance and immediately carted Miranda off home at that very instant. By the time they did arrive tranquillity prevailed the Private Ward section at Brantling; in Room Two a silent star fumed, but fumed in quiet. Ella Logan's trip through the rooms had received varying reactions, but she had a ready answer for all of them. When Mr. and Mrs. Stewart were conducted into Room Five, laden with gifts, Miranda's mother promptly burst into tears, and her father, whistling, of course, the inevitable 'Soldiers of the Queen', poured her out a drink of water and patted her hands, assuring her: "Now, now, Amelia, she's not dead yet—even if she looks like it!"

But instead of fortifying Amelia, this only succeeded in causing a fresh outburst.

"Darling, I'm quite all right," Miranda reassured her mother. "I didn't even know the operation had taken place."

"That's what they all say!" sniffed Amelia Stewart. "But I don't believe it."

There was not much one could do about that except perhaps change the subject, so Miranda said: "It's really quite a nice hospital. I didn't think I was going to like it at first, but I do now—except I have a horrid Night Nurse."

"Well, we'll get her changed at once, dear," Mrs. Stewart said.

Hurriedly Miranda continued: "I've already had a visitor——"

But this annoyed Mrs. Stewart, who seized upon it and said: "But they told us this was the earliest we could see you, and if——"

"Now, darling, it was quite unofficial—the girl next door—she's Lady Cynthia Leftcart-Spratling, and she hates the Night Nurse, too, so we've something in common. There's also a violent American woman in the second room, and she had a fit of temper today, but the Doctor soon put a stop to that."

"Now it's essential you have peace and quiet," Mrs. Stewart told her daughter. "I'll go and see the Matron if you can't get all the rest you need. . . ."

Mr. Stewart and his daughter exchanged glances. "Amelia dear, you've got to stop fussing about Miranda. After all, she'll have to look after herself shortly, and——"

"I know! I know!" Amelia remarked tragically; she paused and then added quickly: "That reminds me, here's a letter from Jack for you. It arrived this morning."

"Oh, thanks, darling."

Miranda took the letter, which had a Canadian stamp on it, and put it under her pillow. Mrs. Stewart looked hurt. "Aren't you going to open it?" she asked.

"Not now, Mummie, later perhaps."

"Perhaps?"

"I mean later, of course," said Miranda.

"I don't understand the modern generation," complained Amelia. "I know that when I received a letter from your father when we were courting I could hardly contain myself with excitement!"

"Daddy was probably a very exciting fiancé, dear!"

"Regular Casanova, I was, Miranda," Mr. Stewart said. "Mind if I have a grape? Must eat the patient's fruit—that's *de rigueur*."

"It'll be strange without you, darling," Mrs. Stewart remarked.

"I'm not married yet, dear."

"No, but you accepted him, and you're going to Canada—oh, don't talk nonsense, dear."

"Don't blame me, blame Father."

"Nonsense, blame your mother!"

"Well, anyway, don't put all the blame on me; Miranda's in love with him—she's the one who's marrying him," said Mrs. Stewart, as if the subject was now closed. Miranda was about to answer, but changed her mind. Her father noticed this and frowned, then turned to undo some of the parcels they had brought her. More books, chocolates, flowers and perfume. They were darlings, but they had spent far too much on her; Miranda uttered a protest which they, rather pleased about it, cut short.

"Nonsense!"

"Anyone would do the same."

"It's not often we get a chance to spoil you."

"And we're going to lose you soon!"

Oh dear! Mummie was back on the trip to Canada again! That was so typical of her; she had been thrilled, and indeed thrown Miranda and Jack together, and now that they had formally announced their engagement, and Miranda was going out to Montreal for the express purpose of being married there, and now that it had all come to pass the way she had wished it, she was full of regrets. Miranda sighed.

"Well," said Father, realizing that the visit had not been entirely successful. "I expect you're tired——"

"She looks so white, the poor darling."

"—We'll be getting along. The Sister said we could come in again this evening, before dinner."

"Oh, good!"

"Now be a good girl, write a nice long letter and tell him you're perfectly all right and you'll soon be with him," said Mrs. Stewart, then, realizing again what this meant, added: "though just why he can't

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give up that silly chewing-gum factory and live here I can't imagine."

Miranda did not answer this.

When she was alone she remembered the letter she had slipped under the pillow, and she retrieved and opened it. It was in Jack's most endearing mood, and although it was written on the rather flashy stationery of his father's chewing-gum factory, with an annotation that read 'Office of the third Vice-President', Jack had resisted dictating it and had written in what was obviously a laborious hand. Miranda had soon stopped him dictating his love letters; that was so typically Jack, always playing to the gallery. She could imagine him saying: "Oh—say—Miss Mertins—take a letter to my wife-to-be. Of course, this is strictly confidential. . . . My own sweet darling . . ." Yes; and the whole outer office staff reading it during the lunch hour!

Oh, Jack! There was so much to think about; so much to decide before one took such an important step—Americans and Canadians were inclined to be flip about marriage and children and love-nests. It was particularly disturbing to an only child who had lived in sedate calm; holidays at Torquay or St. Moritz in the winter, and Bournemouth or Dinard in the summer, visits to the Torchlight Tattoo, May Week—of course, chaperoned—at Cambridge, the St. Kilda's Old Girls' Dance at Grosvenor House, and an occasional Hunt Ball; sheltered was the word for Miranda, but Miranda's mind was a madly whirlwind thing; there was rain on her face and wind in her hair, and the all-intoxicating thrill of being young and excited about it, in her head, and her heart was her own. That, perhaps, was the crux of the business. She didn't love Jack, not really one little bit.

And, at that moment, there was a tap on the door of Room Five, but although she heard it, she was too busy thinking to give it much attention, so she didn't bother to answer; then, to her surprise, a young man, short, with curly brown hair and a freckled face, was standing by the door and apologizing. "Oh, I'm so sorry—forgive me. The nurse definitely said Five; must have been playing a joke on me, I suppose," he was saying, and Miranda was thinking: He's quite serious; it's not a put-up job. What a funny way his eyebrows have of shooting skywards as he talks. He has nice white teeth like Jack's—like all Americans—and beautiful hands. One of his hands held a large music case, the other a hat that he obviously crammed on his head without ever thinking about its shape. He seemed a young man with a purpose. He had drive, obviously. But he was shy, and it was rather a 'doggy' shyness; if he had a tail it would wag as if to suggest that there was no harm done. And, indeed, there was not.

He was meanwhile saying: "I'm looking for Mike—er—Mr. Mahoon."

"Oh, yes. Well, let's see, by a process of elimination," said Miranda, "he's not in Six or Seven—because Arthur Lane's in Seven——"

"The racing motorist?"

"Yes."

"I heard he was here. I've seen him on the films."

"So have I," said Miranda; "so Mr. Mahoon must be in one of the four rooms that side of mine." She waved a hand in the direction of Mrs. Draybridge's room. "I suggest if you poked your head into those rooms——"

"Oh, I wouldn't like to poke my head into all of them—besides, it's rather rude——"

"He might be next door—and then you're all right."

"Yes, that's true, but he might be in the very end one."

"You could knock and if it wasn't his voice you could continue and not go in till you heard him," Miranda suggested.

"That's a good idea!" said the new-comer, but his brow wrinkled. "Though I expect I'd be very annoyed if I heard someone knock and I was in bed in a hospital and wanted to see visitors, I'd be very irritated if someone knocked and didn't enter."

"That's true," said Miranda, "always, of course, if you wanted to see visitors."

"Oh, I think I should," he said boyishly, then thought that perhaps that was a hint. . . . "If I've bothered you . . ." he began. He had such nice manners, and he spoke carefully as if he had not gone to the right school but was determined not to let that count for or against him. He was eager and disarming somehow, and Miranda heard herself saying: "Of course not—look in again before you go—after you've seen Mr. Mahoon."

"Thanks, I'd like to," he said, then added: "I'll find a nurse and get her to take me to Mike, I think." And he was gone.

Lying there, thinking about him, she wondered why she had bothered; perhaps the boredom of just lying convalescing. Perhaps because she was thinking unfavourably about her fiancé. She glanced at Jack's photograph and pulled at her lower lip as she contemplated it. Her mind left him and sought the young boy who had recently entered. It was silly how she had instantly liked him. He was too short; she never liked small men; they'd look absurd dancing together. She smiled, and stopped smiling when she wondered why she had even thought that they might dance together. Why on earth would they? In any case, he wouldn't come back, he'd leave Mike and go home. Instantly she hoped that he wouldn't. At once she wondered what he did. Perhaps he was a member of Mike's orchestra. Yes; she remembered his hands, rather like a sculptor's; though who'd ever seen a short sculptor? Well, what about Epstein? No, this young man was a pianist, of course. The way his eyebrows shot skywards; too ridiculous . . . but nice

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

MR. GIDNEY TAPPED ON MRS. DRAYBRIDGE'S DOOR, ROOM FOUR, AND meekly awaited her reply.

"Come in," she said in a monotone. Mr. Gidney, girding up his fawn Jaeger dressing-gown, coughed nervously and made a slow entry into her room.

"Good morning. I'm—er—Mr. Gidney. Sister thought—that is—if you don't feel like a visitor . . ." he stood there, embarrassed now that he had come in to see her. She could picture the little scene in his room, with Sister, cheerful, bright, saying: "Well, I see no reason why you shouldn't get up today. Just for a little while, of course! Now why not go in and have a chat with that nice Mrs. Draybridge, she's awfully lonely, and it would cheer her up." She didn't want any cheering up; she wanted to be left in her loneliness, left in peace, to think. To lie looking at that well-discovered ceiling and just think

without people coming in and poking their fingers through the bars and prodding at her. . . . Mrs. Draybridge turned her eyes in Mr. Gidney's direction. He stood there, tranquilly awaiting her decisions.

"Of course, do sit down," she said. He fetched a chair, pushing rather than lifting it, in order not to disturb his taut body-belt, and sat near the bed, his hands folded in his lap, and, looking around the room like so many people about to start a conversation, he saw the flowers which one of the Juniors had given fresh water and returned to her bedside table. He coughed thoughtfully, and all the time he was thinking: 'her voice shows she doesn't care; completely listless . . . she's dying, that's the voice of a person who is dying . . . that's wrong, that is so wrong.' But he said: "What lovely flowers!"

"Yes, they are lovely," Mrs Draybridge replied. The conversations she had had throughout the months with the numerous Private Ward patients who had been healed and sent on their way—they had all started with an apt remark about her flowers! . . . She heard Mr Gidney continuing: ". . . Yes, they do, always. I can picture them in a garden, not in a vase; I don't like flowers to be put in vases."

"No?" she answered, her mind beginning to drift away, as was her custom, whilst the visitor continued on between long silences and Mrs. Draybridge by instinct would pop in an occasional "Yes," or "Do you think so?"

"No, the proper place," said Mr. Gidney, "is a garden."

Yes, that was true enough. She recalled the little house in Sussex where she and Edward had had such wonderful years.

"Francis Bacon once wrote an attractive essay on Gardens," Mr. Gidney said. "I'd like to read some of it to you."

"Thank you," Mrs. Draybridge said politely, thinking to herself: 'If I wanted to read I would read, but I don't. I don't want to do anything; not even breathe.' But the voice of Mr. Gidney had stopped, and when she turned her eyes towards the chair she found that he had gone. She wondered if she had offended him, and tried to concentrate, to think just in what way she had done so—when there was another tap on the door and Mr. Gidney re-entered softly, carrying a slender volume. He smiled imperturbably at her, and sat down again. He studied the index of the contents of the book for a moment, and, flipping the pages, found the one he wanted and, with another little cough, began. "'God Almighty first planted a garden, and indeed it is the purest of human pleasures. . . .'"

Mrs. Draybridge listened, as was her custom, to the first few words, and was about to return to her pain when she found herself attracted to Mr. Gidney's opening sentence. Yes, gardens were wonderful things; she had so loved their garden, but she would never see a garden again, cut flowers only. Mr. Gidney had said he didn't like cut flowers; they weren't the real thing that was quite true, quite true, flowers should grow. Mrs. Draybridge heard him, as he read on, saying: "' . . . followeth, for the latter part of January and February the mezereon-tree, which then blossoms; crocus vernus, both the yellow and the grey; primroses, anemones; the early tulip. . . .'" He read slowly, as if to give one time to think of each flower as he said its name, and one could for a brief moment see them just as one used to go eagerly to hunt for them, the first flowers of the year, growing in odd places, as if laughing slyly at one when one discovered them, as if to say: 'Aha! You didn't expect us to be out yet, did you, Ethel Draybridge, but here we are again!'

Yes, year after year, the flowers came back into the garden; that was very wonderful. But God, who could do all that, did not seem to be able to get Edward to come back to her.

"Don't you think that is charming?" Mr. Gidney said, as if he knew she had ceased to listen and was anxious to carry her along with him every step of the way in Mr. Bacon's garden.

"I beg your pardon; just for a moment . . ."

He repeated it for her: ". . . In July come gillyflowers of all varieties, musk roses, the lime-tree in blossom, early pears and plums in fruit, gennittings, quadlins. . . ."

Yes! It was charming. She could see so clearly their own lime-tree like a gay young bride, radiant in her wedding dress. For a moment Mrs. Draybridge had a wild desire to be there now, even if it was too early for lime-trees. She found herself interrupting him, saying: "What did he say in April?" For a second, Mr. Gidney's eyes smiled, but not his mouth; elation filled him; good for you, Mrs. Draybridge, good for you! he thought. He turned back and read, a slight very slight quiver in his voice: ". . . In April follow, the double white violet, the wallflower. . . ."

Wallflowers. Oh God! Wallflowers, they used to lie in fat contented bunches by the side of the dining-room, basking and sunning themselves and getting sunburned and brown, splashed with yellow and deep red. . . . Wallflowers. . . . Oh God, oh God, to see a garden again in full bloom; April, when the land is young and so much is growing and the wonderful green colour of an English garden. Oh God, give me back one day in my garden. . . . She stopped short in her thoughts; and a fear clutched at her breast, and hurriedly she continued: ". . . not alone, oh God, not alone, of course with him; it must be with him, with Edward!" But, although she did not know it, for a brief moment she had been alone in that garden and there was no Edward and no one holding her up, for she was standing, happily alone, in one of God's gardens, and she had no need of anyone but God. Then, as she realized that she was there, alone, she called at once for Edward, and the desire the momentary fragment, had gone . . . the inky blackness descended. She was Ethel Draybridge, in a hospital, and she could only see cut flowers; not gardens and, because she could not see a garden with *him*, it did not matter . . . remembrances of things past. . . .

Whether Mr. Gidney knew that the moment had come and gone and he could do no more, could not be ascertained, but he had closed the book and risen to his feet. "I mustn't tire you," he said, and his eyes were still happy, for, as he looked into hers, which were now expressionless, deep, unpierceable, he had known them for a moment, seen them as he looked up from his reading, filled with life, with a longing, and Mr. Gidney, an elderly, bald-headed, nondescript sort of man with kidney trouble, was satisfied. "It was nice of you letting me visit you," he said.

"Nice of you to come in." The monotone of that voice! He dragged the chair back to the wall.

"May I come in this afternoon—just before tea—for a moment?" he asked. Mrs. Draybridge nodded. She wasn't thinking of him any more, but only of Edward. Mr. Gidney coughed and turned to the door, and he smiled as if he had won a great victory. It was a victory of no more than thirty seconds duration, but he felt that he could not have been happier had he seen the Holy Grail.

In her bed Mrs. Draybridge lay looking up at the ceiling; oh God, why do you torment me? she asked. I must pull myself together. I must count. I'll count the pauses between the bangs . . . there! That was one, the door of Number Three, next to her. . . . One, two, three . . . there! That was someone walking down the corridor from Number Three past her room to Number Five room. She heard the tap on the door . . . one, two, three. . . .

Hearing his footsteps, too, Miranda hastily picked up one of the novels her people had left her, and pretended to be reading. The shy young man who had visited Mike Mahoon had kept his word; there he was tapping at the door. "Come in," she said.

"Hallo," he greeted her.

So he had come back. Seeing him again for a brief pause she was disappointed; she had waited, it seemed, such a long time, and she had thought about him so much that she had, as was natural, made him too perfect in her mind. He was too short, that was obvious, now. And stocky. She didn't care for short, stocky men. And his voice wasn't quite right. It just wasn't quite . . . and yet there he was, all pleased to see her and diffident and nice, and he smiled at her and they were both at ease.

"Did you have a successful interview?" she was asking, and he smiled.

"Oh yes. I hope you really meant me to come back," he continued. "I thought, if you wanted anything brought in, I've got to return tomorrow, you see, and——"

"Oh, how thoughtful of you. No thanks—as you can see, I've got everything—my people spoil me." Miranda pointed to the books and the fruit and the perfume. His eyes took in all the things on the table.

"Do you like his books?" he asked, indicating the novel which she held in her hand.

"No," she said, "but my mother expects me to!"

He enjoyed that. His eyes alighted upon the photograph of Jack, mentally appraised him and continued on back to Miranda; they asked no questions.

She found herself asking: "What books do you like?"

"Ones by George Orwell," he told her. Then they talked volubly. She found out that he liked Julien Duvivier films, American cigarettes, Escalope of Veal, country tales by Adrian Bell, a short story by Ernest Hemmingway called *Horns of the Bill*. "And, of course, his *Farewell to Arms*?" she added.

"Yes, those two and Walter Greenwood's *Love on the Dole*."

"What else?"

He liked Pantomimes and Punch-and-Judy shows and he always went to hear Kreisler play. He'd been up to London to see *Golden Boy* four times—of course, he would. All this and more. In a series of easy, staccato questions and answers. It had, suddenly, become important. Though just why, she was, later, retrospectively, unable to answer. But there they were, questioning, cross-questioning and answering each other quite naturally, eagerly awaiting replies. . . . And then, "May I ask—are you a pianist?"

He paused before answering. "Yes—I—er—I—well, I'm an arranger," he explained to her. "I—er—I—arrange the orchestrations for the Mike Mahoon songs," he said.

"How interesting."

"Yes, it is."

N.T.S.I.B.

"He writes very successful songs, doesn't he?"

"Yes."

"And you write the score?"

"Yes, that's the idea."

"I should have thought you could write songs yourself—haven't you ever tried?" Miranda asked. For a quick but telling moment his pleasant self-assurance departed; he looked a little startled and ill at ease. He said quickly: "Oh, I'm too busy. Mike—Mr. Mahoon's pretty good to me—I needed a job badly and he gave me one. I—er—I'm bound to stay with him. No time really to do much *myself*—no composing, I mean. Awfully busy—he's like a sort of Edgar Wallace of music—turns out dozens of tunes all the time," he went on, rather hurriedly, excusing himself and trying to explain his lack of originality. "... He's been very swell to me. I needed a job badly. My father died badly off and I've two sisters who have to be educated. ...". She wondered why he was at such great pains to explain all this to her. Was he ashamed that he had no determination, no desire for personal success?

Suddenly he had dried up like a fountain in the sunlight, turned off at the main. ... There was a quick splash as the gay, laughing water fell suddenly into the pond and nothing more came spurting out. It was a pity. Now how had she offended him? She was sorry, because they had become so friendly that it seemed they had known each other for years. He got up. Miranda thought, I don't care if he is short. I like him. I am sorry I have hurt you ... she realized she did not know his name. He was thinking just that, for he said: "I'm sorry I have to go now, Miss——?"

"Miranda Stewart."

"Miss Stewart." He stood there smiling, and repeated the name as if he wanted to remember it, like Americans do on introduction.

"I'll be in to see Mike again," he continued. "I wonder—would you like—I mean, it's awfully rude, I know, sort of a pick-up, but really——"

"I want you to come in," Miranda said, boldly.

"Thanks! Thanks so much!" He was about to go when she called to him. "But you haven't—er—introduced yourself!" she said.

"Oh no!" he grinned. "Excuse me, I'm—my name is Graves—Tommie Graves."

Tommie. It suited him, somehow.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

MARGIE TRIMMINS GRASPED HER HANDBAG VERY FIRMLY. MENTALLY it contained twenty-three pounds ten shillings; for twenty of them she had to thank Lutina Bell, but the twenty-three pounds ten were not in the bag—the bag might be snatched—and Margie wasn't taking any chances.

Twenty-three pounds ten shillings, and an April morning with the sun shining; it was quite *'pairfect'*. Now just how should she spend her day? When she went off duty she planned to decide this at breakfast,

her dinner-time, but somehow she hadn't been able to concentrate. Throughout the meal she thought about the little wad of notes, twenty of them, proudly ensconced in the crevice between her two small breasts held taut by a smart and trustworthy brassiere; that's where the twenty-three quid was. The thought of being in possession of this sum was a little bewildering, but entirely satisfactory and very exciting. You never knew in life what was going to happen, what sort of surprises were in store for you. A lot, of course, depended on just how quick-witted you were, and if you were able to play your cards properly. Little Margie knew that if opportunities came her way she was well able to seize them; Margie did not wait for opportunity to knock at the door; Margie was half-way down the drive with hands outstretched ready to *grab*! But still the tantalizing way in which to spend the twenty pounds was the immediate problem. Of course, she intended, first of all to buy that seven-guinea blue tulle dress she had had her eyes on at the sea-front modiste's, that was a curious thing, and just showed you! Only a matter of a few hours since she had wished for that dress, and there she was, with the money in her bag for it, going down the High towards the front to get it . . . it just showed you!

But, after she'd bought the dress, what then? She'd discarded almost as soon as she considered it the thought of the pictures; you could go to the pictures any day, this was a special day. Then, somehow, her chum Edna, who worked in a small hat shop, was all right, but the sort of person who was good company when you were broke and wanted a bit of sport; the sort of girl you could stand about the bandstand with—who didn't mind the appraising looks of the lads and the whistles of the soldiers—but she wasn't quite the right company when you had a bit of the old splosh. No, nor was Joe Edwards somehow. All right for the back row at the Orpheum, and a fish-and-chip lunch, but not right for a twenty-three pounder! Then there was Mr. Basil of the Estate Office, he would have been better, for he had better taste, was better class than any of the men she knew at Brantling, but they had to be so blinking discreet and dine at poky little restaurants, and half the time he was frightened out of his wits that he'd be spotted; in any case, he had gone off on an early holiday with his wife and kids, so that was no use! So there you were! It was a bit of a teaser. If only the excursion train to London didn't take so long! But she knew that she couldn't get back in time really; if she went to town she could have a bit of sport with E.B., the rich bloke who wanted to set her up in a flat of her own, but it wasn't any good going up for an hour and a half, and she had to be very careful the next few days. At the moment, they believed her story about Lutina Bell—the film star was such a boozier they couldn't do anything else, but Margie wasn't going to do anything suspicious or at all out-of-place, at the moment, thank you! It was a pity that Mike Mahoon wasn't out—blast his synovitised knee! She'd be able to have a good time with Mike. Aha! There she was at the sea-front modiste's, and they had taken her dress out of the window. She did not, today, as was her usual custom, linger outside looking at the other models; she had set her heart on the blue tulle, and quickly she entered. She'd wear it at once, and they could send the one she had on back to the hospital. Then she'd get a new hat to match, but she wouldn't go into Edna's shop for that; Edna would be annoyed that they weren't spending Edna's half day together, and—the assistant was standing there obsequiously, and she was saying: "Yes, the blue tulle one, seven guineas."

"Oh yes, that one. I'm sorry, Modom, we sold that this morning. I am sorry."

Margie did not answer. She turned and walked simply out of the shop and banged the door. She had set her heart on that dress. Damn and blast and more!

She walked along the front, at speed, in order to cool down, and could only reason with herself when she realized that she still had twenty-three pounds in hand, and if she had bought the dress that would mean some sixteen pounds ten only, and she didn't know when she was good for another quick twenty like that. And, besides, she thought, I'll get Mike Mahoon to buy me a twelve-quid dress when he's better, and a good sight better than that poky old tulle. This, finally, put her in a good mood, and she stopped at one of the promenade cafés for a cup of coffee. Perhaps, after all, she would go and pick up Edna. She was a good kid, even if she was a bit common. She'd buy her a cheap lunch and they could muck about and shop or go to the dress circle at the pictures. But even as Margie thought this, her mind was on the Fun Fair. She had pretended all along that it wasn't. That she had had a bit of fun with Syd, that she had achieved her objective. To be kissed by that great chunk of a man, and she knew she had him in the hollow of her hand, that's all she cared about. It had been amusing. He had what it takes, but that was by way of an experiment. She only wanted to test herself, as it were. And now there she was, thinking of wandering along there to the Fun Fair, sort of, to tease him. Of course, she had been thinking about it, actually, ever since she came off duty, well, to be honest, even before that. She had thought about Syd a great deal. But she wasn't going to be a mug. Only mugs went and got a strong feeling for a chap; you got let down if you weren't strong-willed—never do the chasing, that was Margie Trimmings' motto. Oh dear no, she had merely experimented, she wasn't in the habit of being seen with Fun Fair hands; she was all for progress and getting on and going out with gentlemen, but, by golly, Syd could teach the gents a trick or two. Well, why shouldn't she go along and see Syd? God knows, she had thought of everyone. It's true she could go back to the hospital for lunch and pick up one of the other night nurses, but that wasn't her idea of a change, and, after all, Edna was a bit dull. She needed excitement. She needed Syd. The very idea made her eyes sparkle. Her Adam's apple worked appreciably. She knew that was that she had, deep, deep down inside her, but she had never admitted it. That's what that big lout of a man meant to her. She found herself making for the Fun Fair, walking as fast as she did towards the dress shop. Then, as she thought of her former disappointment, the loss of the dress, she slowed up and tried to walk at a more leisurely pace; but, all the time, her heart was pounding and she wanted to walk fast, she would, indeed, like to run. Suppose, just suppose that Syd wasn't there. Or that it was his day off, or he'd been fired—or even been knocked down by the trolley from the scenic railway, shooting off the rails. Supposing . . . oh shut up, Margie Trimmings, but for Heaven's sake do hurry!

And there he was. Grinning at her, knowing, the bastard! that she had wanted to see him. His big mouth wide spread, and those white teeth like a lot of clean gravestones all neatly packed into that spacious mouth. The width of that boy's shoulders. Oh, Syd, Syd, what you had, Syd! She said "'lo!"

"Thought you'd be around," Syd said, the conceited bastard.

God! Men were sickening when they knew that they could twist you round their little finger. Gosh! What was happening to her? "Take it easy there, Margie Trimmings, keep yourself in check."

"Want a tuppenny cornet?" he asked. She nodded.

"Take over!" he said to his mate, a weedy youth with glasses and a pimply face who leered at Margie, a matchstick in the corner of his sensuous mouth. Syd leapt over the barrier with the ease and grace of a trained athlete. Of course, he did it to impress her, the big stiff. H'm! That sunburned face.

"Do your neck up!" she said suddenly. She was trying to find fault, as one did, in an effort to try and break down the power of the person who attracted one towards one. He did as he was told slowly, irritatingly slowly, and he looked down sideways at her and slowly let his eyes travel all the way down Margie Trimmings. She gulped. "Come on," she said, "what about that ice?"

He made her sit on a high stool while he stood beside her and slowly licked the ice-cream. God, so slowly—whilst she had gulped hers down. And now, impatiently, whilst he enjoyed every lingering moment, she watched that strong clean tongue lick the white ice-cream into a thin cone about the cornet wafer. Hurry, hurry, hurry! Oh, damn and blast you! Why the hell did I come? Hurry, you great big slob of a man!

"Come on!" finally she said, madly.

"What's the hurry? Where're we goin'?"

"Stroll," she said, but she knew, as, indeed, he knew, where they would stroll. She had enough strength of will to make it a circuitous route, but they finally ended up by the 'Threepenny Spookie'. She felt him looking at her, and then he laughed. "Same again?" he asked. It was humiliating, but what could she do? "Suits me!" she said.

"I reckon it does," he said, laughing at her, then said: "Got 'alf a dollar?"

"Half a dollar? It was threepence last time."

"I know, but gimme a coupla bob now."

She did so, from the loose change that was in her handbag. He gave it to the man on the money-stand. The man looked at it and nodded: "I get you!" he said, and closing one nostril with his thumb, blew down the other and cleared his nose. And then Margie and Syd were in the 'Threepenny Spookie'. It was dark and exciting, and she took his arm as they walked forward. They passed the strips of rag which were placed so that they tickled your face and which had scared her before, because she thought they were bats or creepy things, and they were making their way over the rolls of wood which revolved. Outside the blaring music of the 'Threepenny Spookie' suddenly stopped and the moving stairs and other mechanized objects in the 'Threepenny Spookie' stopped also. There was a sudden silence. It was frightening; she grabbed hold of Syd more tightly. "What's happened?" she asked. "It's stopped!"

"That's right," said Syd, sure of himself and turning so that she could feel him all down the front of her. "Wotcher think I gave 'im your 'alf dollar for?"

She could picture his grinning face, even though it was too dark to see it. "You're a sly one," she said.

"I know," he replied. "Open your mouth," he said, as his strong bronzed face searched down for hers.

His hands moved about her.

"What's this?" he asked.

"I've come into a fortune," she said.

"What, quid notes?"

"Yes. Kiss me."

"How did you get 'em? Seems to be quite a packet!"

"Be careful, you'll tear my dress."

"Sorry, Ducks. 'Ow's that?"

"Nice."

"And that?"

"Nicer. . . ."

Some moments later, as she lay there in the dark, content and lying in his arms, she asked: "You married?"

"Ah!"

"No kidding, are you?"

"I might be."

Margie was about to pass him a wonderful compliment when he got up. "Where you off to?" she asked drowsily.

"Ah!" Syd said again. "Well," he continued, "it's no good my thanking you. It was mutual, eh?"

Margie sat up suddenly. The tone of his voice had changed.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"So long, and good luck, and, well, thanks. After all—why not?" And he was gone in the dark.

"Syd! Syd! Stop larking about. Syd, I'm lost—I can't get out. Syd, you swine! Where's my twenty-three quid? Syd! . . ."

Fifteen minutes later, the man who owned the 'Threepenny Spookie' let her out. Syd had gone back to the Fun Fair, he said. He was only having a joke. Twenty-three quid? That was a lot of money for a nice little girl to have. No doubt Syd was minding it for her, and hadn't she perhaps better do up her blouse. What was that about the police? Well, who was stopping her, making his 'Threepenny Spookie' into a brothel. Perhaps she'd like him to tell that to the police? Ruining an honest man's reputation. She could take a running jump at herself. . . .

At Syd's stall the weedy youth still continued to suck his matchstick.

"Syd? Yeah. He give me a message for you. Says to give you his love and, yes, he *was* married. Wot, lady? Now, now. 'Ow should I know where 'e lives? Got a blinkin' carry-van I think. Eh? I dunno, I tell you. He quit. Yes? Well, you too—upside down."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE LEFTCART-SPRATLING ROOM WAS CROWDED. HER FRIENDS HAD begun to arrive about three. Fortunately most of the patients in the Private Ward had had their afternoon nap before the party began. Sister took a lot of persuading to agree to so many visitors, but, there being no grave case in that wing, she was finally won over by a promise that no more than six visitors would be in Cynthia's room at once;

at the moment there were fourteen. The drive-way in front of the main entrance to the hospital looked rather like Parents' Day at school, a rather smart school; there were large cars, small cars, sporty cars and snooty cars, but all rich ones, parked neatly with a group of chauffeurs talking over their employers' idiosyncrasies in the shade of the chestnut tree by the main gates.

The buzz of conversation from Cynthia's room could be heard as far down as Sister's Room, and, occasionally, a too-obvious laugh could be heard in the semi-private wards. Here, Duffy snorted: "A fine how-do-you-do! Cocktail parties now! What the hell next!" Duffy sighed. He had planned to visit Arthur Lane again, but Arthur had previously warned him that the overflow from the Spratling party was bound to dribble into his room, and so Duffy kept away.

Miranda didn't mind the noise; it was rather fun trying to picture the personalities that went with the various voices and laughter. One thing was certain: Cynthia's friends were obviously true to type.

Cynthia was enjoying herself for the first time since she had been in Brantling; she only wished that Margie Trimmings was on duty—that would have put the bad-tempered little bitch in her place. Now and then Ella, the nice little nurse, would come into the room and plead with Cynthia's guests to keep quiet for the sake of the other patients, and they would good-humouredly ply her with offers of drink, and she, in a horrified voice, would assure them that she was on duty and couldn't possibly touch the stuff. Then the party would be quiet for a short while but soon, accustomed as they were to talk in loud tones, they would be laughing and shouting as loudly as before.

In Room Two, Lutina, who had refused her lunch and then, later, demanded it just when the kitchen staff had finished washing up, kept ringing the bell to ask what the celebrations were for and why couldn't she join in, and when was that rude son-of-a-gun-of-a doctor coming back because she was going to give him a piece of her mind, but she was quite docile, and obviously had every intention of remaining in bed, at least, for the moment. Mike next door in Three was furious that he had had no invitation to the 'party'. After all, wasn't he a celebrity? It was true that he wasn't exactly an intimate friend of Miss Leftcart-Spratling, but he—well—he had met her. Oh, heaps of times! Where? Well—oh, lotsa night clubs—often on the same parties there. So Mike said, and when Evelyn Charteris, who was on duty with Ella, suggested that he ought to send his card in or at least a few flowers, he was all for sending out for a large bunch of tulips for Cynthia, but he wanted them at once for they were to be his means of introduction to the party. When Evelyn said she was unable to send out for them until after tea, he told her not to bother, but he continued to fume about the Society pests, and wasn't that just typical behaviour and it just showed what friendship meant to some people, and didn't Nurse Charteris think he was badly treated, and what was she gonna do for him and if she didn't sort of treat him badly and that, honestly, he didn't give a goddam really about the Night Nurse—what the hell—could he help it if the girl was a bit crazy about him? Of course, he kidded and clowned around a lot, but deep-down he was a pretty good guy, and once he got set on a dame, well, he stayed steady. Yep; no chasing around, strictly a one-girl man; once he found the right girl, and, well, right now he sorta figured Nurse Charteris was it!

"Then," said Evelyn Charteris, with exasperating coolness, "my advice is that you had better sorta figure again!" And she left Mike

biting the ends of his tortoiseshell glasses and wondering why this cool blonde baby was so hard to break down. It made you mad; he'd tried, he had tried hard with the Charteris nurse. He'd even encouraged that night one, the Trimmings girl. She was a hot piece all right; he liked her; she was well worth a second-hand fur coat or a coupla theatre tickets and a good dinner, why not? But she wasn't a patch on the Charteris girl. The Charteris girl could pass as a lady, quite easily, not one of these flashy types. He liked his woman to look well-dressed and the sort who made men turn round in restaurants, but, really, behind all that 'front', he'd have given anything to have a girl who was a real lady. One who could wear tweeds and such things, and who looked what the Americans called 'class'; that was his idea of a real woman. Quiet. Quiet and not-so-quiet, if you get me. These so-called quiet society ones, they were dynamite really. All those cool-as-cucumber ones were, once you got to know 'em. He bet that red-headed society troll in Six was a bit of all right, once she got steamed up. That's the sort of girl he'd like to be around. Society stuff. Class. God, he'd have given fifty quid—well, thirty, anyway, to have been invited to her room with all these snobs. It was worth sending her some flowers, he could pretend he met her somewhere. Where the hell would she go now?—Where could they have met? Cannes, perhaps. He'd been to Ostend and Paris—better not risk making a mistake. Well, he might easily have met her in Paris. Come to think of it, p'raps not. Not where he'd spent most of his holidays in Paris. Be a bit of a laugh if she had been, though! Yes, he'd risk a card saying 'We met in Paris'. And he'd talk fast once he was with her. He was quite a witty fellow when he wanted to be. He could make the girls laugh, and he got on all right with men, too. Knew a few good stories. He'd ring for Charteris and get those flowers, no matter if he did have to pay for a taxi to and from the florist.

"Now what is it?" Ella came in, but not that sulky blonde; she was a holy terror, she knew it only made him more keen if she didn't come and take his messages or fix his pillow. He'd find ways and means of fixing her. Boy! It would be grand if she were nuts about him. That would be something. He'd give thirty quid for that to happen. "I want you to get some flowers for Miss Leftcart-Spratling. We're old——"

"But you just said it didn't matter to Nurse Charteris."

"Well, it does. I don't care if you have to send the Hall Porter in a taxi."

"Some of you patients—honest to goodness, I think you think this is a hotel."

"If it was the service wouldn't be so lousy!"

"Now, kiddie!"

"Aw, gwan, Nurse. Now, lemme see, what was it she used to like? Toolips, yeah, toolips. We'll get her four—no, make it three—three nice bunches of toolips—and, say, can you get me a card to write on?"

"A card? Let me see, well, the only thing we've got is a death-card—would the back of that do?"

"Eh?"

"The back of a death-card."

"What the hell's that? What's it say?"

"Well, 'Dear'—then there's a blank," explained Ella, "for the name of the next of kin. 'Dear Blank, we regret to inform you that ——' then there's another blank where we fill in the name

of the deceased—"Mr. Blank died at" then there's another blank——"

"Hey, what are you trying to do—kid me?"

"Oh no, Mr. Mahoon. We've got plenty of those. Of course, they're black-edged and——"

"Black-edged!" shouted Mike. "Are you nuts? Do you think I'm going to send a black-edged card to my friend, Miss Leftcart-Spratling? Now, Nurse, please don't give me the run around. Will you please do me a favour and get that porter out in a taxi to the best florist in Brantling? Here—here's the dough, and will ya please hurry!"

"All right, kiddie," said Ella.

If he doesn't hustle he'll never get back in time, thought Mike. Hell's bells! God! I'm behaving like some dumb Cinderella; I just gotta go to that party.

Arthur Lake would have readily exchanged places with him. He sat up in his bed and smiled politely as one after another group from next door came in to see him. Now and then, in the few moments he was allowed to himself, he could hear Cynthia saying to this or that visitor: "My dear, guess who's next door? My dear, Arthur! But, of course, Arthur Lake, who else? I know! But the most amazing coincidence. Anyone would think we'd kissed and made up! No, don't be silly, darling. I assure you—I've been here weeks, and Arthur went and knocked down some poor old hag only the other day. Yes, of course, go in and see him. He'd adore it."

And in they would trot, just as if he were some new prize zoological specimen.

"Arthur! Cynthia said you were here. What an amazing coincidence!"

"Yes, isn't it! Awfully good of you to motor down from town to see her."

"Nonsense. But, of course, we would. Actually we were at Seabridge, and it's only a few moments away and we wondered what had happened to her. My dear, she's the end—who'd have thought of coming here for an operation? If you ask me, I think she's got a Thing about Nick Carlton."

"Shouldn't be surprised," Arthur would say politely, and invariably this would receive a loud laugh.

"Arthur—you're too rich! I know you're both crazy about one another."

"Well, she did traipse all the way down here to be operated on by Nick!" Arthur said, thinking 'That'll fix you—you old hay bag!'

"Aha, but are you quite sure you weren't already in Brantling? I suppose she didn't come down here just to be near you?"

Oh God! The way people always expected the worst; always longed to be able to see mysteries and subtle implications in the very barest statements of facts! How they'd love to think that Cynthia had given Robert the go-by and they were together again! Anything for a bit of choice tittle-tattle. Such charming people. God, he'd like to tell them all to go and jump into the sea! If only they really knew the circumstances, that would give them something to gossip about. They could dine out on it for weeks! Then one was saying: "Oh, I met Bob the other day."

"Oh, really?"

"Yes. He looked frightfully depressed."

"Yes?"

And then on into a long speculative discourse on why Robert was looking depressed, hoping that by some gesture, some chance remark, some embarrassed look on his face, they would be able to cluck happily afterwards: "I knew that she'd gone back to Arthur. Did you see how he looked away when I said how poorly Robert looked? Though Robert did take her away from him——" Blab, blab, blab! Thank God he was able to be detached. Perhaps it was this detachment that had interested Cynthia. One thing he knew, that he was even willing to put up with her friends for the sake of loving her.—Had been willing, he corrected himself. Past tense, please. . . .

And so they went on, drifting in and out, back to Cynthia and then back again. Jumbo Godfreigh Slessingers just had to autograph the splints on his leg; Wileen Willoughbie smeared lipstick over his forehead (why did all women who couldn't ever wear that mauve-coloured lipstick inevitably use that colour? he wondered), and, of course, the ferrety-faced Mrs. de Light Proudfoot spilt her cocktail all over the counterpane. The things he had endured for Cynthia! And now, the irony of it all! Having gone their own ways, there was he, in the very next room to her in a private hospital, being bored by her friends, just as he had been six months previously. And all through that silly old woman char who had scurried across the road at dawn. Yes, life was extraordinary. Come to think of it, he'd like to send a message to the old girl in the Public Ward. An idea presented itself to him; he grinned at the thought. "Oh, Lightie," he said to Mrs. de Light Proudfoot, "do me a favour, will you? Get Cynth to give you some of her flowers, she won't need them all."

"Of course, but I don't want any. We've oceans in our——"

"Not for you, dear. But for the woman I knocked down."

"Oh yes, of course. How sweet of you!"

"Just my nature!"

"Where is she—what room?"

"She's down in the Public Ward—her name's Durkin."

"How quaint. Yes, all right."

"Now."

"At once, my Poppet," she said.

'Good', thought Arthur, 'not only has that got rid of you, but I'd give a lot to see you trying to be nice to the poor old girl downstairs—one old hay-bag to another—though I'd rather dine with Old Mother Durkin any day of the week.'

CHAPTER TWENTY

"THESE ARE FROM MR. LANE—HE HOPES YOU'RE BETTER!" SAID MRS. de Light Proudfoot, dumping the flowers on to Mrs. Durkin's bed and thinking, 'What an old crone, and how awful hospitals are! The smell! And fancy all these people around you while you are being ill—thank God for money—amen!'

Mrs. Durkin looked at the flowers with such distrust that Mrs. de Light Proudfoot had to reassure her. "No, really, they are for you."

Mrs. Durkin smiled, baring those pale gums; she tried to speak but,

somehow, no words would come out, and then, suddenly, tears began to course down her cheeks and she glanced round the ward so proudly, so pathetically that Mrs. de Light Proudfoot was deeply touched. She thought 'Oh my God, the poor Sweetie, I don't suppose she's ever had a bunch of flowers given to her in her life before. Oh, my God, she's so pleased. When I first came in here I thought I was like the Major's wife doing the right thing to the poor parishioners, pretending the smell under my nose was not there and trying not to be sick, and hoping I could get out to the lavatory before I was; and I thought, Blast Arthur, he knows I'm a snob and he knew I'd hate it, and now here I am looking at this old woman with her parchmenty face and those silent tears rushing down the dozens of little tram-lines, and I feel strangely happy, as if I was pleased I'd come down to see the old Troll!' And then Mrs. de Light Proudfoot did a strange thing for her, she stooped down and kissed Mrs. Durkin on the forehead and then hurried out into the passage and burst into tears herself.

Nurse Lily Fraser, who was just coming in with mugs of tea for the ward patients, put down the tray and went over to her. "I say, are you all right? Here, sit down—I'll get you a glass of water."

"I'm sorry," said 'Lightie', pulling herself together. "I've suddenly realized what a moo I am," she said, and, blowing her nose on a piece of expensive linen the size of four postage stamps, she hurried along to the lift. Lily Fraser cocked an eyebrow towards her golden hair and shrugged an elegant shoulder; sometimes she thought the patients should be visiting the visitors in hospitals, they were the ones who were, usually, most affected.

Meantime the party upstairs carried on unabated. In the middle of what was going to be one of Jumbo's hilarious stories, Nurse Logan brought in a large bunch of tulips from Mike Mahoon. No one seemed to know anything about Mike Mahoon, although there was a card which read, 'Hope you are making a fast recovery. Would like to meet you again. Mike Mahoon.'

Cynthia read out the card. Jumbo, patiently waiting to continue the story, added, "My dears, he sounds like a gangster!"

"Don't you remember the man?"

"No, but who cares? Shall we ask him in? Is he allowed up, Nurse?"

Ella looked a little dubious. "I expect so . . ."

"What's he like?—what does he do—this er—Mr. Mahoon?"

"Well, he's a song writer——" began Ella.

"Oh poo! Theatricals!" said Angela Alwyn, with disdain. "Do go on, Jumbo!"

So Cynthia shrugged her shoulders, and said: "Leave it for the moment, Nurse. Thanks, darling." And out went Ella, and Mike waited and waited, but he did not get to the party. . . .

In Room Four, Ethel Draybridge was counting the pauses between the times that Angela Alwyn laughed; you could tell that particular laugh, it rushed up the scale at a furious pace, broke, and stopped suddenly, just as suddenly and as artificially as it had started. Then, there was a knock on the door. Tea-time at last. Well, that passed the time away a little. . . . To Mrs. Draybridge's surprise, Mr. Gidney brought her tea in.

"I hope you don't mind?" he said. "Nurse was bringing it in for you—and you said I could return for a few moments. . . ."

She didn't mind either way. He was a nice man, very kind, but it

really didn't matter very much, either way. . . . If he wanted to read to her, maybe it would make her sleep. But he hadn't brought the book. That was interesting about gardens; she had so loved gardens. But that was in the past. He was busy pouring out her tea for her and saying: "Don't you like the smell of tea?"

"Yes," she said, and it could have just as well been 'No', 'Maybe', 'Perhaps', 'Who cares?' Mr. Gidney stirred the tea round and sniffed it, the steam enveloping his pale face, his expressive eyes savouring the thoughts that went with the smell. "Yes," he said, "Indian tea reminds me of Ceylon . . . have you travelled, Mrs. Draybridge?"

"Yes," she said, and thought 'Oh, my Lord, how I have travelled!' "India and Malay," she said.

"How interesting," he said.

"Oh no," she replied with the finality of death.

"—And China tea reminds me—not of China, but of long green lawns at a house I stayed in at Southampton once. . . ."

This elicited no response from Mrs. Draybridge, so Mr. Gidney, handing her her tea, inquired: "Do you take sugar?" It startled her. It was so long since anyone had asked her that. Such a simple, unassuming, polite question. Do you take sugar? Someone wanted to know not what was wrong with her, or what went on behind that mask that hid her real self; someone wanted to do some small service for her: place two lumps of sugar in her tea! Well, that was strange; she didn't seem to be able to recall taking sugar in her tea until she found herself saying: "Two lumps, thank you." Then she realized that she had never bothered, the tea would arrive and she would pour it out and stare at it and sip it, waiting for it to cool, pleased at having something on her mind, the fact that the tea was too hot, and then she drank it. It was wet and it was by then not too hot, and tea was over and that was that, and, of course, now she realized there had been sugar. She supposed it would be nicer with sugar; it used to be, come to think of it. Ethel Draybridge found herself stirring the sugar with the spoon.

Mr. Gidney was saying: "They seem to be having quite a good time in Six."

"Yes," dutifully replied Mrs. Draybridge.

"Yes. Rather a jolly crowd. Making an awful din, but not doing any harm," said Mr. Gidney tolerantly. "There was quite a din in Two early this morning—some American lady. She didn't seem to like the doctor. Funny about Americans" he observed, "they say what they think. . . ."

"Yes," said Mrs. Draybridge. She sipped the tea. Yes, it was rather pleasant.

"Are you enjoying that?" she heard Mr. Gidney ask. She looked a little startled. Why? What has that to do with him? Who cares whether I am or not? The thoughts whirled quickly around her tired head. But Mr. Gidney, it seemed, did care; for he sat awaiting her reply, his eager face forward, not too intently watching, spying, probing . . . but wanting to hear her say 'Yes'.

"Yes," she said, and he was pleased. . . . Why was this man pleased? Why did he care in what manner or how she liked her tea? Who was this man?

"Mr. Gidney, forgive me, what—what do you do?"

"My occupation, you mean?"

"Yes."

"I am a retired bank manager," he told her.

"How interesting," she said, but already she had lost interest.

"Yes. It used to be."

"Used to be?" She was listening with care again; that past tense reminded her of herself.

"Yes, you become very interested in people, you know. You see them trying to make a go of their lives; some successful, some unsuccessful. All struggling, all paying in and taking out. Life is rather like a big bank, I often think," said Mr. Gidney, "there's a debit and credit account for all of us," he began, but at once perceived that this was going to bore her, so he changed the drift of his conversation and continued quickly: "I am a widower, and when I retired I wandered around, still looking, watching. There's a lot to see in this world if you want to."

She looked quickly at him; was that preaching? Was he getting at her? Why was he here?

"Yes, if you want to," she said, looking at him, but he did not want to make an issue of this; instead, he said: "Being alone makes one awfully selfish."

"Yes?"

"Yes—I'm afraid so."

"Haven't you any relatives?" she asked.

"No. So I've just roamed about. It's been pleasant. . . ."

"Weren't you lonely?" she asked, and thought 'He probably doesn't know the meaning of the word.'

"Oh yes. It's no good sitting on the touchlines and just observing; you have to share your impressions, your desires, your disappoints."

She asked: "What—you have disappointments?"

"Of course, we all have," he told her, "in varying degrees. There would be no purpose if we hadn't."

"You think there's a purpose?"

Mr. Gidney took her hand; oddly, it was only later that she realized this, and he said: "There has to be a purpose. We would disintegrate if there was not."

Disintegrate! The very cadaverousness of the word; you could almost smell the rotting corpses. She was disintegrating slowly; going bad . . . but why not? Perhaps Mr. Gidney could read one's thoughts, for he added: "It's not a question of will-power, it's something finer."

Now what did he mean? He had murmured that he'd like to see her the next day, and while she was thinking about this, he had left. She was so busy thinking she failed to count when Angela Alwyn laughed her artificial laugh in Room Six.

Going back to his own room, Mr. Gidney met the Day Sister. "Well?" she asked him with a smile. "Are you going to cure her?"

"I hope so," said Mr. Gidney fervently.

"I hope so too," said Sister. "She only needs a little courage."

"No, Sister, forgive me, she needs someone to make her believe in herself."

"I see. You ought to have been a psychiatrist, Mr. Gidney."

"In a small way perhaps I have been," he said, with a little nod of the head.

"Shall I help you back to bed?" Sister asked.

"No, I'll sit in the chair for a while if I may," he replied, and made his way, slowly, into his room. Sister watched him and then went into Room Two.

"Good afternoon!" she said to Lutina. Lutina nodded.

"I've something for you," Sister continued. "It's been sent down by car from the studios." Lutina sat up in bed. "What is it?" she asked. Sister slipped her hand behind the bosom of her apron and produced an unopened cablegram.

"Holy smoke, gimme that, will yah!" said Lutina excitedly, and tore open the cable. It was from Jan. He said: *Darling I miss you and I adore you always.* Lutina smiled. It was the first time she had felt happy since she had been in the goddam country.

"Aw gee," she said softly. "Aw gee."

"Good news?" Sister inquired.

"Yeah, yeah. From my Big Moment. Say, how do you send cables here? Where are my clothes? I gotta get outa here!" Lutina said, throwing back the bedclothes.

"Now, now. We don't want a repetition of this morning's episode, do we?" said Sister.

"Where do you get that 'we' stuff? Who got wallopped—you or me?" Lutina asked her angrily. "I gotta send a cable to Jan, an' I'm on my way to do it." She started to dress.

Sister sighed. "I told Dr. Carlton we'd need him again."

"Yeah? Where is that big Palooka? I'd like to say a few parting words to that charming olde worlde English gent. Mind, now—out of my way, Babe, I'm a tornado when I'm roused!" By now Lutina was out of bed and was busy dressing.

"I told Nurse to take your clothes away," murmured Sister.

"Yeah, you would! But it seemed your goddam hospital sorta slipped up."

"Miss Bell, I forbid you to leave!" said Sister.

"Aw, in your hat!" said Lutina.

"Then I shall have to fetch Dr. Carlton."

"That's right, and tell him 'Good-bye' from me, will yah?"

Hurriedly Sister rang the bell and went out into the corridor. Ella Logan came to answer the bell, and Sister told her to stop Lutina from leaving whilst she ran down the corridor to see if Nick Carlton had left for London.

Speedily Lutina completed dressing; she did not bother to put on her stockings or to comb her hair. She had enough clothes on to get the hell out, and the cable from Jan had decided things for her. She was Lutina Bell, *the* Lutina Bell, and they weren't going to park her in no frowsy English hospital. She turned to go and found that Ella barred the way.

"Sorry, kiddie," said Ella, and before she could say more she received a sudden buffet over the head with a suit-case, and she fell, to her surprise, on the floor. Lutina walked swiftly down the corridor. A short little man in a dressing-gown that was far too large for him came out of the lavatory whistling gaily to himself. He stared intently at her as she passed. "Jumping Jehoshaphat! May I be dog bitten—so that's who it is!" said Duffy. He turned to watch Lutina as she strode to the lifts. She paused there, thought that, perhaps, they might not be self-operative, and decided to try the stairs. Duffy watched her and whistled. He made his way to the lift and rang for it—this, he thought, is going to be fun . . . the plot thickens!

At the bottom of the stairs, Lutina turned and decided to go straight on. She passed Lily Fraser, who was busy washing-up in picric acid at the landing basin and who only gave her a superficial glance and

thought 'Another of those dizzy Society girls from Six'! and she passed into the large Public Ward. Pausing, to decide whether to continue through or retreat back again, Lutina was amazed to hear a croaky voice call out: "Lootina! Lootina Bell!—It's you. Gor' bless you!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

IF THE OLD CRONE WHO WAS CALLING OUT HAD ADDED, SUDDENLY: "It's your dear old Mother!" Lutina could not have been more surprised.

"Who the hell are you?" she asked.

"I am glad to see you!" said Mrs. Durkin. "You see——"

But Lutina had made up her mind to turn back; she swung round as Duffy entered. "Good afternoon, Miss Bell," he said cheerfully.

"Now what are you doing here?" asked Nick Carlton as he came into the ward from the direction Lutina would have taken if she had proceeded forward. There was a brief pause. Duffy, who had pieced his little bits of information together and realized that Lutina was in a spot, promptly said: "I brought Miss Bell down here." Lutina's eyes opened wider at this; it seemed everyone at Brantling was 'screwy'. Sister came in, followed by Ella, and both of them were panting with excitement and the fact that both had made a pretty attempt at the hundred yards' record in a nimble sprint along the downstairs corridors. They joined Duffy and Lutina, who were facing 'Old Nick' (who was in his hat and coat, prepared to go off to London), and waited for him to issue commands. Ella could positively feel the lump rising on her forehead. 'Old Nick' was looking surprised. "You what?" he said to Duffy.

"I asked Miss Bell to come down here," Duffy replied cheerfully, and, seeing Lutina was about to deny it, he continued quickly: "You see, I came down—er—with Sister's permission, of course—to get a story from—er—this good lady here——" pointing at Mrs. Durkin.

"That's right—Durkin's the name, sir!"

"—And in the course of conversation, I learned that her favourite star was Lutina Bell. Well, knowing that Miss Bell was in the hospital herself, I thought it would be a very nice gesture if Miss Bell called in as it were, and said 'hallo' to Mrs. Durkin."

Nick Carlton exchanged glances with Sister. Ella Logan began: "But she didn't——"

"How did you know Miss Bell was in the hospital?" 'Old Nick' cut in.

Duffy grinned. "Newspaper men are everywhere, sir, you turn back the sheets and they——"

"We'd better go into Matron's room," said 'Old Nick' quickly. Standing listening to this extraordinary explanation, Lutina, all thought of sending a cable to Jan Sebastian now out of her mind, could not help recalling, with some slight embarrassment still, the smacking that 'Old Nick' had given her. He was awfully good-looking. He'd screen well, too; he had excellent features, the real British type that Americans 'went for'. Come to think of it, C-K-L might give him a test; he'd be a

pretty good bet for her new film. "Say, do you want to go on the films?" she asked him.

'Old Nick' glared at her. "Could you be persuaded to behave yourself for just a few moments?" he snapped out at her. Lutina, strangely for her, had no come-back; she meekly refrained from answering. As they went towards the Matron's room, Duffy called out to Mrs. Durkin: "We can't stop now, but I'll bring Miss Bell down another time."

The rest of the patients in the ward, who had, during this extraordinary scene, remained spell-bound, burst into a hum of excited conversation; Mrs. Durkin, the flowers that Arthur had sent down to her still piled high on her bed, had decided that she had indeed been hit so suddenly and so severely by the car that she had immediately gone to heaven. She had, she had to admit to herself, never imagined that heaven was going to be like a large hospital, but then, she consoled herself with the thought that, after all, very few things turned out to be as you expected. She had nothing to complain about; no awful alarm clock to wake her up, nice young people to wait upon her, flowers from rich ladies and gentlemen, and a visit from her favourite film star, the great, the wonderful, the glamorous Lutina Bell. . . . The other patients or angels or people who were also knocked over by cars, and who lay with her in this celestial sorting-house, were asking her how she had managed it. And when did she know about Lutina Bell being at Brantling, and had she had the cheek to write to the American star, and if so what did she say, and how could they get her to talk to them, and when would Lutina be back? . . . it was all too exciting for Mrs. Durkin. She shook her head signifying that she was unable to answer any more questions, and she beckoned to Lily Fraser, who had followed Sister and Ella at a more leisurely pace. That comic little newspaper man, what was he up to? And how did he know about the film star?

Lily Fraser went over to Mrs. Durkin's bed, she hoped that the excitement wasn't going to prove too much; Mrs. Durkin lay back, a cherubic expression on her well-creased face. "Dearie," she gasped, "dearie, it's all so wonderful—do you think I could 'ave another cup o' char?" she asked.

"Of course," said Lily Fraser. She went off to get another mug of tea.

In Matron's room, Duffy was blandly assuring Nick Carlton that he had private information that Lutina Bell was coming to Brantling, and, being a newspaper man, he wanted to get a good story; that the idea of introducing Lutina to Mrs. Durkin had seemed an excellent one, and, as Lutina Bell had no objection, they had proceeded with the scheme.

"Then," said Nick, "what was all that about a cablegram?"

He turned to Sister, who, looking at Lutina, replied: "It must have been a trick, I suppose."

Lutina, on being reminded of the cable, started. Of course! She had been on her way out to cable Jan when she had got caught by Nick and the reporter guy. Just what his object was in helping her, she didn't quite know. Well, she must get a cable to Jan right away, though somehow it didn't seem quite as important as it had. Nick Carlton was now eyeing her with complete disfavour: "Miss Bell, why are you being such a complete nuisance to everyone?" he was asking. The goddam nerve of the guy! And in front of the others, too!

"Come again?"

"I said why are you being such a confounded nuisance? You know that your film company particularly came down here for secrecy, that they did not want any publicity attached to your visit, and yet you deliberately set out to get as much publicity as possible by allowing Mr. Duffield here to write an interview with you and the old lady in the Public Ward—why? What is the matter with you?" He stared intently at Lutina. She liked the way his nostrils flared open, and the lines from them to his mouth deepened when he was angry.

"When I need a doctor I'll give you a ring," she said. She saw the look in his eyes, and rather wished she hadn't spoken.

"All right, Sister, see Mr. Duffield back to his room. I'd like a word in private with Miss Bell," Nick said.

"If you hit me I'll sue you for assault and battery!" shouted Lutina before the others had left the room.

"Don't worry about that," Nick assured her.

"You wait outside there, Mister!" Lutina called out to Duffy, "and if I scream, ferchrisake come in and take a poke at this guy, will yah?"

Duffy agreed, and left with Sister and Ella Logan. Nick waited until they closed the door, then he turned and looked intently at Lutina. He looked a little tired, rather like a teacher who has come to the end of his patience with a particularly mischievous child. In truth, he had operated on six patients, and one of the operations had proved a more complicated one than they had at first thought; it had required draining and had gone on well over another hour; for a moment he was back in the Op. Theatre, and had relived a quick cutting movement that had been his neatest work that day—

"Well?" Lutina asked impatiently. He seemed to withdraw his gaze through her, and adjusted it so that she was in focus in front of him.

"I suppose," he said, "that you've been spoilt. I suppose you've been spoilt ever since you were a baby."

"Look," she said, "you can skip all the sermons. What I do and how I behave is my business."

"I know, I know all that, but what I want to know is why? Because you are a film star? Do you think that matters?"

"I've done what I liked before I ever saw the inside of a movie studio!" she answered defiantly.

"Yes," said Nick. "I believe that, but why?"

"Why? Why? Questions all the time—what's the matter with you, I'd like to ask?—I'm tired of being quizzed like this—who cares? I ain't sick."

"No, but you're going to be," he replied quietly.

"What?"

"If you don't pull yourself together you're going to drink yourself to death." He said it in so matter-of-fact a manner that she knew, instantly, that he was serious.

"Aw gwan!" she said, but her inside was frightened.

"Yes, you are. I've seen it happen. People like you can't go on like that; it isn't humanly possible."

"Well, who cares?"

"You may not care, but a lot of people care," Nick said. "Take, for instance, that old woman downstairs in the Public Ward—she'd care."

Lutina laughed falsely. "That 'ud do me a great deal of good!" she replied sarcastically.

"Maybe not, but think what she represents. There must be, I suppose, as you're a celebrity, thousands like her. Thousands of people who get great pleasure out of seeing you on the screen, who enjoy your work. Have you thought of that?"

"Sure, what did you think I wanted to be a star for?"

"Ambition, for one thing."

"Yep, of course, ambition."

"Miss Bell, I think you've got—to use a word you'll understand—you've got guts," Nick said.

Lutina looked surprised. "Hey—how come the change of tactics? What's the idea in you throwin' out bouquets?"

"I mean it. It's obvious that you were pretty determined to succeed."

"That's so."

"Well, you've got what you want. Then what happened?"

"I dunno. What do you mean?"

"It seems to me that you suddenly found that, having achieved your objective, you found you'd got nothing to fight for."

"I don't get you," said Lutina.

"Have you any friends?" he asked her suddenly.

"A million!"

"Yes, I know, but *real* friends?"

She was silent. Come to think of it, she hadn't any real friends; there was the gang around the studio and a few of the boys with whom she had a lot of laughs, but, well, real friends—and whoever she was nuts about at the time—but who the hell wanted real friends? "What for?" she asked.

Nick smiled for the first time at that interview. His teeth were even and white like an American's (why the hell didn't the English do something about their teeth?) and when he smiled it was like a bit of Californian sunshine.

"Well," he answered, "let's put it this way; haven't you any interests?"

"Sure, I suppose so—clothes an' parties an' good times. . . ."

He smiled again. "If you were to lose those interests—and I don't think they really mean so much to you, otherwise you wouldn't have used the word 'suppose'—wouldn't that worry you?"

"Of course."

"Good!" he said. "Then if you don't pull yourself together you won't have any good times; do you understand that? There won't be any parties and clothes and so on."

"What do you suggest?" she asked, challengingly.

"I suggest you don't drink so much," he said, looking hard at her. Lutina looked straight back at him. "And," Nick continued, "I know you've got the guts, if you want to, to do as I suggest."

Lutina thought about this for a moment, and then shrugged her shoulders. "And suppose I don't want to?"

There was another pause. "I want you to," he said. Lutina who had turned in desultory fashion to the window, turned back and looked at him. There was no arrogance, no command there; yet, too, there was no pleading. It had been a statement of fact. It sort of left you breathless, and it was, at the same time, unanswerable. What did he mean?

"What's your name?" she asked. It was the silly sort of trite thing you did say when, slowly, momentarily, big things were happening, were happening to you. She thought about it later, just as she had thought about his determination and thoroughness at their last interview. As she waited for his reply she found herself studying his hands; they were long-fingered and, for a man, quite beautiful.

"Nick Carlton," he said gravely.

"I wasn't fooling when I said you'd do O.K. on the screen," said Lutina, but this time, somehow, knowing that the idea of him in pictures was, of course, idiotic talk. He had, no doubt, more important work to do.

"Did you say that?" he asked lightly

"Yep."

Then he laughed, and she found that she wanted to laugh with him. She noticed his hat and coat, and asked: "Where are you going?" Suddenly, it seemed that they were friends.

"To London. I have to operate in town tomorrow. I only come down here twice a week."

"What about me?" she asked. It had become important that she should ask him that instead of himself.

"I propose to see your film people tonight," he told her.

"Why?"

"I think that we—you and I—understand each other. Do me one favour," he said, "behave yourself. Stay here tonight and I'll arrange for you to leave tomorrow." There was a further pause. "All right," she said. He looked pleased, then grave again. "About your interview. We'd better say it was a septic finger or something, though God knows why you should have chosen Brantling! That efficient little newspaper man will have the story all over England, anyway, so you'd better carry on with the story. I'll tell Sister what we've arranged," he added ringing the bell in Matron's room, finding that she and Duffy were not in the corridor. Whilst awaiting Sister, he smiled: "Mr. Duffield didn't wait to—er—protect you!" he said with a smile. Lutina made a grimace. "And I had heard what fine gentlemen the English are!" she said.

"Don't you believe it!"

"Oh, I don't know," she said, and asked: "Do you like operating?"

He nodded.

"What's it feel like?"

"That's a funny question—what does it feel like to act on the screen?"

"I don't know, when you're working you don't sort of——"

"Analyse your feelings? No; but it gives you great pleasure."

"Yes. Say, you're a strange man."

"I don't think so."

"You're not so tough!"

"Nor are you."

Lily Fraser tapped on the door and entered.

"Oh, Nurse, will you fetch the Private Ward Sister for me—'phone her from the corridor," Nick asked. Lily nodded and went off to do this; it seemed that 'Old Nick' and the Picture Star had declared an armistice.

When she had gone Nick said: "By the way, if you were going to send a cable, I'll take it for you." Lutina nodded, but, somehow, she didn't feel she could compose the right sort of message to Jan. Perhaps

later, when she was in bed. Funny! She suddenly had no recalcitrant thoughts at all at the idea of going back up to Room Two. No, she didn't want to cable Jan, not right now.

"No, thanks," she assured Nick. "That was just a gag of the reporter guy's!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

MARGIE TRIMMINS, AN INFERNO STILL RAGING WITHIN HER, LOOKED around Cynthia's room and gasped.

"Do come in, Nurse," said Cynthia, too politely. "I shall be leaving very soon now—so I had a little party to—er—celebrate."

"I'll say you have, and a nice mess, too!"

"Well, you know how it is," Cynthia explained sweetly, "people will drink at these things and glasses get used, at least, at my parties."

Of course, at some parties they drink out of the bottles."

Margie shot her a quick look: was that a dig? "And I suppose I'm expected to clear it all up?"

"Well, Sister didn't mention anything about that but she did give me permission to have a few friends in——"

"A few friends!" sniffed Margie.

"And—er—well—there it is."

"Yes, there it is all right!" Margie rang the bell over the bed to summon her Junior, and began to pick up some of the glasses, angrily smacking them together in the hope of annoying Cynthia, and thinking, 'That treacherous, blasted Syd! That wicked, deceitful swine. Men! The deceit of men! The dirty beast! Leading me up the garden like that and pinching my money! Men! By God, you couldn't trust 'em; that was a fact. She'd get even. She'd fix him and all the others!'

"You seem rather bad-tempered this evening, Nurse," said Cynthia pleasantly. Margie didn't deign to reply. "I'm sorry you missed the party. I'm sure you would have loved my friends."

Margie turned round and her eyes narrowed. "You think you're very funny don't you? We can't all have money and be lordgod-almighties. I'm not going to smack your face, because I don't want to leave this hospital just yet, thank you very much, but I haven't finished with you—so don't forget it. You'll be sorry you weren't a bit more civil," she said. At that moment the Junior entered. "Start to clear this mess up," Margie ordered her, and walked out of the room. Cynthia was too surprised to say anything.

Cynthia watched the Junior juggling with the glasses, and waited for one, at least, to fall. Red-faced, the Junior made a crab-like movement to the wash-stand and managed to put two glasses down in safety. Smiling at her ability to cope with the situation, she forgot that she was holding another glass under her armpit, and, lifting her arm to readjust the others she held in her hand, she let slip the one from her armpit and it crashed to the floor. The girl looked so upset that Cynthia had to laugh.

"Oh lor'!" the Junior exclaimed. "I am sorry."

"Not half as sorry as you're going to be!" Cynthia suggested

"You mean Nurse Trimmings?"

"I mean Nurse Trimmings."

The Junior looked so frightened at this that Cynthia instantly forgo her irritation over Margie's threat. "Here," she said, "bung it out of the window—it'll fall on to the flower beds—if there's any inquiry afterwards I'll say that one of my charming guests threw it out."

"Is that all right? Would you?" the girl asked gratefully

"Yes, definitely," Cynthia reassured her.

"Thanks awfully."

"Nurse Trimmings seems to be a bit of a tartar," Cynthia remarked.

"You've said it!" exclaimed the Junior, and blushed at her audacity

Safely esconced in her bed again, Lutina said she'd like to have a word with the reporter. The Night Sister, who had taken over from the smiling, relieved Day Sister, agreed with alacrity. Lutina was behaving so sweetly and looked so utterly charming that it was a pleasure to have her at Brantling, and, now that the story was 'out' as it were, that she was there, it would be nice to tell one's friends and relations that one was on quite intimate terms with the famous star.

Duffy came in rather sheepishly and grinned.

"Sit down, Mr.—er—I didn't get the name?"

Duffield—my friends call me Duffy."

"Is that an invitation?"

"I don't see why not."

"Tell me—Duffy—what was the idea, downstairs, you sorta protecting me like that?"

"Oh well, I saw you rushing off in a paddy and I recognized you and I thought 'this is a bit of a mystery—how come the big movie star is at Brantling?'—so I thought I'd follow you," Duffy explained, "and——"

"—And instead of letting Dr. Carlton grab me on my way out, you pretend we had an interview with the old gal in there—why?"

"Because, frankly, I didn't want them to make a monkey out of you in front of the ward."

Lutina thought about this. "And I thought all noospaper men were lice!" she said.

Duffy smiled. "I could sue you for that—or could I?"

"I doubt it. I was paying you a compliment!"

"I think you American film stars are wonderful," said Duffy, with a broader smile, "and what," he added, "do you think of our Police?"

"Even I'm wise to that one!" said Lutina. "What room are you in?"

"Room? Me? Oh, I see what you mean. . . . I fear, being a man of only moderate wealth, I'm in a semi-private ward . . . alongside a boy with a hacking cough, a very old man who snores, and another gentleman by the name of Beech, placed there, I'm sure, not as a patient, but in order to allow me to make the time-honoured gag—just the son of a Beech!"

"You know," said Lutina, "you and I are going to get on all right, Duffy, old timer."

"Yep, I think we are."

"Well—you've scooped us—that's the right expression, sn't it? Now what?"

"Well, Miss Bell, I'm anxious to get the story out quick. We can

use it in the *Gazette* in the morning—that's our daily. What are you 'in' for? And why at Brantling? Why the mystery?"

Lutina looked steadfastly at Duffy. "Look, Duffy, can you take it?" "I expect so."

"Well, your old auntie here, the big movie star, drinks like a fish!"

"H'm!" said Duffy. "You ought to have been a newspaper man!"

"I'm quite serious. I came off the *Magnifique* simply plastered. They had to sober me up for my English picture. They figured that a London nursing-home was too dangerous. Whisked me down here by car—not that I remember much about it. And here I am . . . all sobered up. That's the story."

"Oh!" said Duffy slowly.

"What's the matter, Big Boy? That'll fix you a bonus and the front page, won't it?" Lutina asked. Duffy looked abject. "Oh lor'," he muttered.

"What's eatin' you?"

"I can't use that," he said.

"No, I didn't think you could—and still be the guy I thought you were. But, look, I've told you the truth an' I want you to have your story—all right, so you say I'm in Brantling and make up something for me."

"That's nice of you," said Duffy. "I wish we could link up that old girl downstairs."

"Well, she could be my long lost Grannie!"

"No, I'm serious. . . ." He thought for a moment. "I'd better call the C-K-L publicity boys; there is a story in your hearing about the old girl down there—maybe if you'd invite her up to tea tomorrow—"

"I hope to be out of here at noon—so that Doc Carlton said. Say, I'm a good girl now. Being strong-willed and all that," Lutina explained.

"Doesn't matter. She can come up at eleven; we'll take pictures of you cutting a cake and all that—the hell with the time!"

"You newspaper men are so accurate!" Lutina grinned, and added: "Sure, I'll do it—be glad to—but meantime that doesn't tell me why I'm here."

"Oh, I'll think of something," Duffy assured her.

"Well, make it good!"

"Leave it to me." Duffy got up to go. "Say, what do you know about this Doc Carlton guy?" Lutina asked him.

"Good bloke, I believe," Duffy told her.

"What does that mean?"

"Excellent surgeon—got a great reputation—"

"Reputation—you can't mean that he's known to be hot?" Lutina was obviously distressed.

Duffy smiled. "I mean he's reputed to be a great surgeon." He noticed that Lutina seemed relieved.

"H'm! I'll bet he is!" she said, and added: "Didja ever see such hands? Beautiful—say, I'd like to watch that guy operate. I really would."

Duffy spun round. "Now that is a story! Leave that to me!" he said enthusiastically. "Hey! Now where you goin'?"

"To use Sister's telephone, it's the only thing I get free in this dump!" he said.

"O.K., Duffy, be seein' you!" she said. She lay back and closed her eyes. She didn't quite know why, but she felt happy and contented; usually, at this time of the day, she was ready for an appetiser.

The man next door, who would break into song, had started again, but even he couldn't disturb the serenity of her mind.

Mike followed the lyric from the paper he held in his hand, and sang with fervour. Tommie Graves, who sat by his bed holding his music case, waited apprehensively. He pretended to be at ease, and he glanced, as he thought, casually round the room, but his movements were too jerky and his Adam's apple moved apprehensively. He was thinking: 'Oh God, make him like it, please make him like it!' And Mike continued to croon. At what seemed an interminable wait, he completed the chorus and glanced up at Tommie. He was amused at the look in Tommie's eyes. That was the way to have people; waiting on your word. The poor cove was desperately anxious for Mike to give him the O.K. on it. It was good all right. He'd been blinking lucky to discover Tommie Graves, but that was all right just as long as Tommie didn't realize it. Tommie was poor as a blinking church mouse, supported a large family of sisters, and didn't know his own value. Ruddy good job, too. If it wasn't for Mike he'd still be thumping a piano on a second-class tourist boat plying between Liverpool and the Isle of Man. That's where Mike had found him. At least, that's where young Tommie had found Mike. He'd burst into the cabin where Mike was busy being sick, and pleaded with Mike to look at his songs. Mike was too ill to throw 'em out of the port-hole; he merely waved the kid out. Later, at the Grand, feeling better, he had come across them, stuffed in his overcoat pocket, and he'd fished them out. Undoubtedly the boy had something. He would ordinarily, have pinched the lot of them, for he was sufficiently well known to be able to do so, and conveniently forgotten the lad on the boat, but he had, quite recently, rowed with Eddie Blutner who 'ghosted' his material—for Eddie, getting too big for his thin, shiny boots, was demanding more money. Demanding, mark you, of Mike Mahoon. It would do Eddie a bit of good to discover that Mike could get along without him, and also to prove that Eddie was a ruddy liar, for Mike could and did write his own songs, when he wanted to.

And so, to his unutterable delight, Tommie became an arranger and pianist for Mike at a small salary and ten quid extra for every song he brought in and Mike accepted. Of course, it was laid down in the contract that everything accepted 'belonged' to Mike, and had Mike's name on it. One day, of course, Mike said he'd give Tommie his big break and put his name on one of his own songs . . . one day. Meanwhile Tommie should be very glad and grateful to be working for Mike Mahoon, the famous song writer; Mike had done plenty for the kid. He scrutinized Tommie's eager young face, awaiting his verdict. It was another winner, undoubtedly. It was a gift at ten quid. A ready gift.

"O.K. Tommie, it's got possibilities.—I'll have to kick it into shape—tell you what—as it ain't quite right—I'll make a special price for you on it—as I could *not* take it, see what I mean? Well, what about six pounds ten?"

Tommie gulped. "All right," he said quickly, and got up.

"O.K., boy! See you soon."

Tommie paused. His lips were tight, as if quelling words that wanted to come out.

"About the—er—payment?"

"Oh yeah. Sure. Let's see, come in tomorrow, huh?"

"Very good. Good night!"

"So long, kid."

Tommie walked out and paused. Thank God! Thank God! Six pounds ten wasn't ten pounds, but it was better than nothing. That paid up the grocer's bill and the laundry. Good! Thanks, God! He knew it was good, and, without much bother, he had composed it at once . . . the girl in the room next to Mike had sort of inspired it. He stood outside her door and tried to summon up enough courage to go in. At that moment he heard footsteps approaching from the direction of the lift. It meant he'd have to leave without seeing her unless he made a quick decision. Taking courage into both hands, he tapped on her door and, without waiting for an answer, entered.

"Good evening," he said.

"Hallo!" Her tone told him she was pleased to see him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

"WELL," SAID MIRANDA, "AND WHAT'S THE GREAT MIKE MAHOON written today?"

Tommie blinked at her. That was funny! "Oh, something rather good, I think," he replied, his heart thumping, "it's called 'The Things You Say'."

"Nice title. Have you got it there?" She indicated the manuscript case. "It would be fun to hear it before it's published."

"Actually, Mike—Mr. Mahoon's got it. I—er—was just arranging it—the idea is 'The Things You Say—bring on that certain feeling—er—when said by you'."

"Go on," Miranda urged. Tommie blushed. "Songs sound so silly when recited—lyrics do, always."

"What do you consider the best song—I mean lyric and music—which one do you like best?"

"You mean jazz stuff—not classical?"

"Yes, modern, of course."

"I have about ten favourites—excluding the Swing 'classics' like 'Sweet Sue' 'Mary Lou' or 'Honeysuckle Rose'——"

"'It Don't Mean A Thing'?" Miranda asked. Tommie grinned. "Yes. Are you an Alligator?" he inquired. Miranda surprised him by saying "Yes—but do go on. Tell me your ten."

"Ray Noble's 'The Very Thought Of You', 'My Heart Stood Still'—Rodgers and Hart—Berlin's 'Easter Parade'——"

"Kern's 'Smoke Gets In Your Eyes'?"

"No—his 'Folks Who Live On The Hill', and Gershwin's 'The Man I Love', and Hoagy Carmichael's 'Stardust'."

"That's only seven."

"Well, *about* ten," Tommie smiled at her.

"How about 'Love Walked In'?"

"No."

"'Blue Skies'?"

"No."

"'Lover Come Back'—another Rodgers and Hart?"

"H'm."

"Well, two of Cole Porter's—'Begin the Beguine' and 'Night and Day?'"

"Rather!"

"And 'Love Is The Sweetest Thing'?"

"No."

"You're just being difficult. Kern's 'Show Boat' melodies?"

"All right. Tell me, where did you acquire all this modern musical knowledge? You didn't tell me about it last time I visited you."

"Women have to keep something up their sleeve!" Miranda explained with a smile. "Besides, a lot of people think that jive lams are boring."

"Your list was hardly jive!" said Tommie.

"Oh, I can give you that, too—Basie's 'Swinging The Blues', or Bix Beiderbecke's 'Deep Down South'. Personally——"

Tommie stopped her. "You amaze me more and more!"

"I don't seem that type?"

"Well . . ." Tommie hesitated.

"I know, but when you think about it, how many people do turn out to be true to type?"

"Oh, I don't know."

"Well, let me put it this way; just think how many people there are who aren't a bit as you expect them to be."

"Yes, I see what you mean."

"Personally, I'm rather the dull type," Miranda said.

"What a funny thing to say."

"No, I mean it. I'm so obviously 'nice'—do you understand what I mean? People like me to be at parties—I fill in the background rather well. I achieved a moderate success with men, but only with the pleasant but dull men."

"Who do you want—the dark-skinned Cubans?" Tommie asked her, somewhat puzzled at this frank disclosure.

"Not quite that, but, don't you see, there are—there must be—dozens of girls like myself, who aren't happy with stodgy respectability."

"That's a fine confession."

"Perhaps I'm not putting it clearly. I don't mean I'm aching for a violent *affair* with a wonderful-looking dago, but I do want vitality."

Tommie gulped, and Miranda, regretting the word, blushed and quickly added, in qualification: "I mean, I want to be liked by men who are alive. I rather resent my docile self—I want to be shaken out of it!"

"It's a pity I'm not an all-in wrestler!" Tommie said.

That made Miranda laugh, but she cut it short because she felt he did not understand. "I wish I could explain it better. Because I'm 'nice' that doesn't mean to say that I don't want to live—to have to work my way, fight life a bit, perhaps go hungry."

"You crave excitement."

"No, I don't crave excitement, but I do want to say when I'm eighty that I can look back and admit that I haven't just sat and let life go on about me."

"Well, you're not going to sit indefinitely, are you?" Tommie replied, and he looked at the photograph of Jack by her bed.

"That's my fiancé!" said Miranda, with sudden directness.

For a brief moment Tommie felt as he had once felt before, when he had been neatly knocked out in a school boxing match; suddenly he

was on his back, and all the breath he had left him with a rush. And, as if realizing this, Miranda continued at speed: "I'm supposed to be going out to Canada to marry him. He's sweet. Wealthy family—they're the chewing gum people, and we get on wonderfully well—that's where I got all this Swing stuff—Jack and I are crazy about it—he's got a terrific collection—all the old ones too, and complete Coleman Hawkins, Krupa and Artie Shaw records. We seem to like being together; some people have the knack of that. It isn't just because we like dancing together and swing bands, we can be together for long periods and still not be bored . . . that's the test," she paused; he wondered why she had troubled to defend this.

"That's fine." He tried not to be sarcastic in his tone; what the hell—they had met twice—three times—and liked one another; now he learned she was to be married. All right, so what? But he was to receive a further surprise, for Miranda said: "Yes—I suppose it is—but, you see, the very thing that I'm afraid of is happening to me. I'm not going to live."

Tommie looked startled. "What? You're not—you can't——"

"Oh, I don't mean I'm going to die—I thought I was, I suppose everyone does before their first operation—but I mean if I marry Jack I shall settle down to a life of ease and luxury and screaming boredom!"

"Oh," said Tommie. What could you say? He knew now what Miranda had been attempting to tell him; she didn't want to go to Canada and marry; he found, suddenly, he was on his feet once more; someone had picked him up, dusted him off and he had never felt so good. He found himself saying: "I'm glad." He found Miranda replying: "I'm glad you're glad!" and, in a moment, he was so happy that he could touch the ceiling. They looked at one another, anxious to explore, anxious to talk as they had talked before, anxious, in talking, to see if there was a way out of her difficulties. Her people, that was her immediate problem; she would be wondering how she could tell them that she wanted to break off her engagement, he realized how difficult it was for her. The foolish way lives were constructed: because she had always had security and saw ahead of her, Miranda wanted insecurity, whilst others, tired and frightened by the fight, desired only security.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked.

"I was thinking I had so much I wanted to say to you and, somehow, now that you ask, I find I haven't, or rather, all the things I know I have and want to ask—are forgotten."

"That's a nice feeling—I think I have it, too."

There was a pause whilst they looked at each other as if for the first time, rediscovering little marks and lines and the curve of a bone. "Why don't you compose?" she asked. He had that same startled look in his eyes again, but she held her look and willed him to overcome whatever he was afraid of. "I like your eyes," he told her. "Especially when you smile—your eyes smile before your mouth." He meant that, and she found herself doing what he had described. "Tell me," she said. He knew what she meant. "Suppose I tell you I do?" he said. "You wrote 'The Things You Say', didn't you?" Tommie nodded.

"I knew—when you told me Mike Mahoon had written it."

"I see."

"What happens? Does he pay you to write his songs?"

"That's the sort of arrangement we have."

"That's awful—how cheap!" Miranda exclaimed.

"It's a business proposition—he has the name and I have the songs."

"Well, that's got to stop!" she said determinedly. He loved the way her firm chin snapped under her lower lip, rather like a young female ballet dancer; they all seemed to have tight little determined chins.

"I shall have to make you my manager," he said.

"I should jolly well think so. How long has this been going on?"

"Some time—Mike's been very good. I played the piano on a passenger boat—most of the people were sick *before* I started," he added quickly.

"And I suppose Mister Mahoon gave you the job of writing his songs."

"Yes, but I pestered him!"

"And he gets all the credit."

"He pays me and I need money—like a lot of other people."

"We'll change all that," she said, as if they were going through life together.

"When you've come back from Canada?" he asked.

Miranda looked at him, that fresh, young, *vital* face. "I'm not going to Canada," she said, "you know that!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

MARGIE TRIMMINS COULD NOT CONCENTRATE. SHE KEPT LOOKING AT the clock, and every time she did so she wondered where that dirty snake Syd was and what he was doing with her twenty pounds and whom he was playing about with. Then she wondered about herself, and she bit her lip and hoped everything was going to be all right . . . In desperation she got up and walked through the Private Ward wing. Everything was blinking quiet and there was no excitement. With the beds full there was not even the chance of a nice casualty to liven up the proceedings; that, at least, would have kept her mind occupied. She dug her hands deeply into her pockets as she mooned through the semi-private wards and came across a letter which she had not, in her fury and irritation, opened on her arrival back at the hospital. She walked into the corridor to read it. It wasn't important, only a friend of hers who was at one of those quiet but expensive London places tucked away in a smart side street. Ada was the girl's name. She and Margie had been together at a Midland hospital for quite some time, and they got on well together. Ada usually made Margie laugh. She opened the letter with this anticipation, and was surprised to read that Ada had a holiday coming up, and had decided to spend it at Brantling, was going to stay in 'digs' on the front, and was looking forward to seeing Margie and, as she put it, 'dish the dirt and have a few giggles together'. Well, thought Margie, a ruddy sight safer to be around with Ada than playing around with the Fun Fair boys. God! What a fool she'd been. She couldn't believe she'd have made such a chump of herself, but she had! God! She hoped everything was going to be all right. H'm! Then, quite suddenly, she had a plan. Of course,

if it wasn't, well, she'd know in a day or so, and now, in the meantime, she'd just keep Mike 'warm' as it were, just keep him *interested* just in case.

She tapped on the door of Room Three, carefully giving Lutina Bell a wide berth (she'd let the Junior take in the star's dinner), and entered Mike's room. Even in her worried state she had to smile. The Night Sister had suggested to Mr. Gidney that he might care to have a word with Mr. Mahoon, the song writer, and Mr. Gidney, who liked such songs as 'Passing By' and 'Down the Vale', was sitting with his mouth open and a perplexed expression on his face, whilst Mike was doing all the talking. ". . . Yeah, sure, well, as I was saying, when you get a combination of George Wettling on the drums, Joe Massala on the clarinet, Charlie Teagarden on the trumpet, maybe Red Mackenzie on the vocals—all Solid Senders—Waal— Oh, come in, Marg—er—Nurse, I gotta visitor!"

"So I see. Don't let me disturb you."

"Hey, come on back!" Mike shouted, but Margie had closed the door. Poor Mr. Gidney wasn't quite sure if he and Mike were talking in the same language.

Mrs. Draybridge was asleep, or pretending to be, and the Stewart girl smiled, whether in an attempt at conciliation or because she was bored, Margie didn't bother to discover. She gave Cynthia's room the go-by and tapped on Arthur's door.

"Come in," he said.

"Hallo," said Margie, "and how is the famous racing driver to-night?"

Arthur groaned. "Please, please don't call me that!"

"All right, Touchy!" Margie replied. "So you've got the nose splints off. Feel better?"

"Yes, but my leg and arm itch like hell—what's the matter with this hospital—don't they exterminate bed bugs?"

"Don't be silly—there are no bed bugs at Brantling—it's the plaster—it always makes you feel itchy."

"Could you pour some water over 'em?"

"You are in a bad way. Were you disturbed by the party?" Margie tossed her head in the direction of Cynthia's room.

"I couldn't very well be. You see, I was part of the party."

"What on earth do you mean?"

"I've met Lady Cynthia before, and I knew some of her friends——"

"Oh!" said Margie, and was, once more, put into a bad mood.

"Never mind," said Arthur. "Let's talk about something else."

"All right. You ever been in love?" Margie asked.

"Don't you ever think of hot baths or hockey or books?" Arthur asked her.

"Yes—but what's that got to do with it?"

"You win again. If I'm not careful I'll find you're reading to me!"

"Would you like me to?" Margie asked eagerly.

"Heavens—no!" said Arthur firmly. "Go and read to Mr. Mahoon—the warbling canary."

"He's got company."

"Who's he got with him—the old girl I ran over?"

"No, of course not. Mr. Gidney's in with him."

"So that's why you're wasting time on me?"

"What do you mean? Has that Evelyn Charteris been telling you things?" Margie flashed at him hotly.

"Certainly not, but hospitals are like schools—news gets around."

"I'll pay her out for that!"

"Who out? For what?"

"That Charteris girl—the Day Nurse."

"The blonde girl?"

"Yes. With spectacles," added Margie maliciously in parentheses.

"I've never seen her in them," said Arthur, to be annoying. "You do mean the pretty one?" he added.

"I'll be back," said Margie shortly. Arthur smiled. He reopened the novel he had been reading and sighed. "Thank God for that!" he thought.

Margie walked back to her desk, her head in the air. Stuck-up lot of patients they had in the Private Ward, to be sure. She'd be glad when she moved elsewhere. Yes; she had decided to move. Definitely! But, even as she thought about it, she remembered what had occurred with Syd, the Fun Fair boy, and she realized that she couldn't make a move yet. She might have need of dear Mike Mahoon. Mike had money, and Mike might be very useful. Oh yes, very useful indeed! Well, she wouldn't go and talk to Mike whilst that old bore Gidney was there. She'd pop in and see him later.

But, whilst Margie was talking to Arthur, Mr. Gidney, in a daze, had politely left Mike and was chatting to Mrs. Draybridge. Yes, he honestly thought when he entered her room that she was pleased to see him. Perhaps it was his imagination. And then, to his surprise, Mrs. Draybridge smiled, and she said: "My husband will be here tomorrow." It was a puzzling sort of smile, as if she were excited and frightened and happy and not happy, and it was as artificial as her teeth, yet it was the sort of smile heroes wore when they were being massacred—a smile that says: "Go on, you stupid people, look, I can take it!" Whereas, of course, everyone knew that really they were not able to take it at all. And all Mr. Gidney could say was "I am glad," but he was wondering so many things; if, by chance, things would be all right for poor lonely Mrs. Draybridge and if, after all, she really had been pleased to see him, for that was odd in her present mood—yet was it? And Mr. Gidney was, for once, a little baffled, though he looked very quiet and docile, and it was curious that two such tranquil persons should have such busy brains. . . . Yes, those two brains were, perhaps, working and scheming and busying themselves even more than any in the wing that housed seven private-roomed patients; though in Number Two room, Lutina Bell, the famous American film star, was not thinking that it was time to have a good long drink, but, instead, was thinking: "Yes, I would like to see him operate." That was a man's job. Sorta creative. It was important, and if a job was important you had to admire the person that did it. She realized that the Doc. Carlton guy was worth a dozen Lutina Bells—and she was pleased and calm and happy at the thought.

And, certainly, Mr. Gidney and Mrs. Draybridge's brains were whirling dizzily faster and more furiously than Mike Mahoon's, for he, since Mr. Gidney's departure, was wondering why the hell he hadn't been invited to the Society girl's party. And he was resolved to visit her just as soon as he could. He wished Margie Trimmings would return, but he decided not to ring. In her own time she'd be back. They always came back to little Mike. Idly, as he lay there, he thought it was quite a good way to spend a few days, really nicer to stay in bed. Then Miranda, in Room Five, her brain was not busier than Mr.

Gidney's or Mrs. Draybridge's; indeed no, for she was asleep, and she was having a very pleasant dream that might have been a worry to her subconscious mind, but certainly not her whole brain. For she was bathing at Dovercourt with Tommie Graves and Jack, and Jack kept calling out for them to go out to the raft, and he held up enormous pieces of chewing gum. Then it all changed, and Tommie was dressed up as a choir-boy singing a song in church, and everyone clapped and he said: "I wrote it for Miranda," and Jack, who was with her, clapped and shouted and said "Atta boy!" . . . it was all very pleasant. . . .

Then Cynthia, in Room Six, was at peace with the world and no competition to Mr. Gidney or Mrs. Draybridge, for her worry and mental ailments were behind her. There was, of course, the problem of Robert, her current boy-friend and lover, and Arthur next door; for she did not want to lose Arthur, and, feminine-like, she wanted not only to eat her cake and have it, but to have someone else's portion too. To have and to hold, Arthur and Robert; she could do with both of them. And, being an intelligent lady, she was not bothering her head much about it, for she knew that these things are solved for you. . . .

And, lastly, Arthur himself, who, being so easily hurt in spite of that so-tough exterior, should have been in a turmoil of mental emotion and racing neck-to-neck with Gidney and Mrs. Draybridge for the Challenge cup, instead was at peace with the world, and was letting his brain relax, for he knew that nothing would ever hurt as much as it did, and although that thought in itself was an unconquerable and everlasting ache, Schopenhauer-like he knew that nothing now, because of it, could be quite as bad as he depicted, so he kidded himself and knew, in kidding himself, that he fooled no one—not even himself!

And, along the corridor, in the semi-private ward, Duffy yawned and thought: 'There's only one thing better than a nice soft single bed—and that's a double one.'

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

BREAKFAST TIME IN THE NURSES' MESS AT BRANTLING GENERAL HOSPITAL was a noisy affair. The nursing staff sat at long tables and, for a time, the night and day nurses were together—the night staff just going off and the day staff just proceeding to take up its duty. In the wards the rearguard of the night staff made contact and overlapped with the advance guard of the day staff. The nurses who looked after the Private Ward wing sat at a large table by themselves. In earshot, and usually sharing part of their conversation, sat the nurses in the Public Ward, whilst those in charge of the children's section were further over towards the windows. Breakfast started at a fixed time, but none of the nurses had to attend 'Grace', and all were allowed to move from their tables when they had finished their breakfast or dinner (depending on which 'shift' they were on). Some of the early ones, like Junior Probationer Daphne Short, had already completed their breakfast and were warming themselves or reading the daily papers in front of the fire. Daphne Short was, in fact, studying one of her Nurses' Handbooks. Daphne Short wanted to get on; let the others read the

Mirror and the *Express*; Daphne had her career in front of her. She had exams to pass.

The chief topic of conversation at the Private Ward table was Lutina Bell; it hadn't been anything else at meal times for the past forty-eight hours. Now that it was common knowledge that Lutina was at Brantling everyone felt easier, it was so exciting having all that knowledge stored up within you, and you dying to tell interested relatives. "Lutina Bell! Wot, the film star?" "But of course, the film star." "Well I never!" And so on.

Nicely placed on the front page of the *Gazette*, Duffy had his story; he had completely scooped the field on the early editions. No other paper carried it. Duffy had done his job well. Lutina Bell, it was learned, had chosen Brantling because, although only there for a minor throat ailment which delayed the starting date of her film about a week, she had hoped that she might be able to discover some of her relatives. The Bells, Duffy continued, migrated to America from Brantling a century ago, and Lutina was anxious to see if she could trace them. He added that a poor old lady who was in the Public Ward and who had expressed admiration for the work of the famous film star, had the pleasure of a personal visit from the actress yesterday, at which time a formal invitation to tea had been given to the old lady. This was so in keeping with Miss Lutina Bell's amazingly democratic and genial behaviour, which endeared her to director and prop boy alike at the studios. Blah, blah and so on. Oh yes, Duffy had made a nice little front page all right.

"The chap who wrote this is in the Upstairs A," Nurse Jenkins told Lily Fraser, who was at the next table. She pointed to the story in the *Gazette*, and showed Lily Fraser Duffy's by-line.

"Oh yes, a nice little bald-headed bloke, rather sweet," said Fraser.

"How do you know?"

"He came down, stupid, when I was on duty. How did he get the news otherwise?"

"I say," said Charteris, "there's no mention of any funny business, is there?" She was at the other end of the table, and she, too, was reading a *Gazette*.

"Miss Bell has a slight throat ailment," Ella Logan remarked quickly. Evelyn Charteris grinned. "So I read," she said.

"It was fortunate," said Lily Fraser at the next table, "that she was feeling *well* the time she came down to see Mrs. Durkin."

"What do you mean—'well'?" Ella asked.

"What I say. With all those people in the ward—it was lucky, wasn't it? All they saw was a little bad temper—but not much. The reporter chap rather saved the day," Lily added.

"Yes, I see what you mean."

"You still talking about that writer friend of yours?" Jenkins asked, completing the Duffield story in the *Gazette*. "Why are you so keen—I suppose he said you looked like Garbo."

"Yes, if it's any business of yours, he did, but even so he can be original."

"Then why didn't he try it?"

Before an argument could develop, Nurse Morgan came in, her face wreathed in smiles. She was humming a popular song of the day. She was, as always, depressingly cheerful in the early morning. Nurse Charteris groaned, "If she slaps me on the back I'll stab her with the breadknife!" she declared.

"Good morning. Lovely day, crisp and springlike, don't you think?" beamed Morgan.

"Wasn't the dance jolly the other night?"

Daphne Short sighed; it was so hard to concentrate. She gazed fiercely down at her book and re-read: 'Taking the bed pan in the hand nearest the foot of the bed, she then slips her other hand beneath the patient's buttocks, raising them slightly and slipping the bed pan into position'. Daphne Short sighed again. That job sounded as if it could be classed with the awful morning ritual of "Have you had a motion this morning?" It seemed that all the early, elementary jobs a nurse had to do were extremely distasteful, if practical. The sooner she became a Sister, the better she would enjoy it. She gritted her teeth. "I said I'd be a nurse and I'm going to be!" she said to herself. She read on.

"Any 'Casualties' last night, kiddie?" Ella asked the girl who was the counterpart of Lily Fraser in the Public Ward at night.

"One drunk, rather talkative," the nurse told her.

"Do you remember those drunks at Christmas?" Jenkins asked.

"Do I!" said Lily Fraser.

"I was in Public Ward C then," Jenkins said, "and that little Scottie who went up to Derby—what was her name?—she put a skeleton in one of the beds, and one of the boys woke up and saw it and jumped out of bed and ran off in his pyjamas."

"What—in all that snow?" gasped Morgan incredulously.

"Honest!"

"Didn't he come back?"

"No."

"Gosh. He probably died!" said Morgan, the harrowing scene appearing before her thick glasses.

"Yeah," remarked Grant, unkindly. "And the birds covered him with leaves! And Lily Fraser was so tight she put a nice hot-water bottle into Bed Four, and the man had just had both legs amputated!"

"I didn't!" denied Nurse Fraser.

"Nice work," remarked Grant.

Ella glanced at her watch. "Come on, girls," she remarked.

At that moment Margie Trimmings came in for her dinner.

"Hallo, Nurse, what's been keeping you?"

Margie was in a rage. She sat down at the table and breathed heavily.

"Hallo, what's biting you?"

"That cow! That bitch!" said Margie.

"What's wrong now?"

"That Spratling girl!"

"This is where I come in!" remarked Grant.

"She reported me to the Night Sister."

"Why?"

"I told her what she could do with her cocktail parties!"

"A tricky movement!" murmured Grant.

"If you were rude, it was your fault, kiddie," said Ella.

"Well, I thought she'd stand for it," remarked Margie. "But I'll get even with her!" she said.

The day staff trooped out, leaving Margie drumming on the table.

Up in Room Two, Duffy had taken a copy of the *Gazette* in to Lutina Bell. She lay there laughing so much her eye-black started to run.

"Oh," she said, "you slay me!"

Duffy looked perplexed and a little hurt. "What's so funny about it?" he asked, and added: "I thought it was rather good!"

"It's swell. Absolutely swell!" said Lutina. "But—oh, gee——" She went into fits of laughter again. It was rather good to see her laugh like that, throat back, lovely even teeth, and tears in her eyes. He'd have felt like joining in if he hadn't felt that perhaps she was laughing at him.

"What is it? I'll buy it!" she said.

"Looking for my relatives at Brantling!" Lutina managed to get out.

"Well—I thought that was pretty good—it explains why you sneaked down here instead of going into a Nursing-Home in London," said Duffy. He was beginning to get annoyed.

"It's perfect. Grand!" said Lutina, and stopped laughing for a moment. "But," she continued, "do you know my real name?"

"Isn't it Bell?" Duffy asked.

"No," said Lutina, beginning to laugh again. "No—that's why it's so funny—my name's Beets!" she said, and this time Duffy laughed with her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

MRS. DRAYBRIDGE BRUSHED HER FINE LONG HAIR AND LOOKED AT herself in the hand mirror. Oh, please God, make me look beautiful in his eyes. Oh, please God, make me *desirable* to him. No! That was silly and impossible, but, please God, you could make him want to come back. You could instil in him the memories that I have and, that way, give him back to me. She looked in the mirror and she thought, 'I am old and dull, and what can I give him but just myself, and what is that?' A tired old carcass, a world-weary woman. Yet, if he would but come back, if he would but try it for a while, I would grow young again. I know that. I would be gay and happy and young, and it would all be so wonderful. Lord God, you can do this for me. It would mean almost a miracle, but I believe in miracles. Yes, I do. Honestly, God. He will be here soon. Please do this for me. The days and the weeks and the months go by, and that is all I ask. He will be here soon; do this for me, please God, amen!

On the beach, watching the children making sand-castles, but not heeding them, and also praying, was Margie Trimmings. She said: "Oh, God, don't let it happen! I made a stupid fool of myself, God, I know that, but we all make mistakes, and I'm usually so careful. Oh, God, for heaven's sake help me! I'll promise anything in return. I'll promise never to go with a man again. Yes, I'll promise that, God, I really will. Only see that I'm all right. You can do this for me, God. I know you can, so please, please see that I'm all right." And when Margie opened her eyes, there was her friend Ada.

"Hallo—having a few minutes' kip? I am glad to see you; we'll have some laughs!" And Margie found herself saying: "Ada, I'm in trouble," and she was telling Ada the whole story as fast as it would come out.

In Room Two of the Private Ward, Brantling General Hospital, a

ceremonial meeting was taking place. Clothed in an ornate dress that was far too large for her, a dress hastily sent out for by Duffy, who was always the showman, sat Mrs. Durkin, 'char' from the Mon Repos Hotel (the one on the sea-front). Opposite her, in an ultra-smart nightie, sitting up in bed looking radiant (a special hairdresser and attendant manicurist had been rushed in from outside the hospital precincts) was the famous American film star, Lutina Bell. Lutina, to quote the next day's newspapers, was 'all smiles'. Transformation scene! To the nurses, who had seen Lutina in her less sober moments, the contrast was utterly incredible; Lutina looked absolutely gorgeous. In charge of the historic moment, making ready to perpetuate it for the benefit of future film-goers, was Duffy, still clad in his old dressing-gown and one well-bandaged foot, looking rather like, so Lutina told him, a character from an old two-reel comedy; it only remained for Charlie Chaplin to speed in and tread on the 'gammy' foot for the cameo to be perfect.

Awaiting Duffy's word of command were three newspaper photographers with cameras and flashlight bulbs and, though it is feared, almost outside in the passage and very much resentful of that fact, was a C-K-L Studio Publicity Official, who had been rushed down to co-operate with Duffy on his stunt. The co-operation so far had been to obtain a tea-set and two cups for Ella Logan, who, with Junior Probationer Daphne Short, was also outside Room Two 'shooing' off inquisitive nurses and any of the patients who were allowed up and who might wander along in order to see the great Lutina in the flesh.

Mrs. Durkin had decided that wonders would never cease. There was she, not more than a day or so ago, doing her bit of cleaning, sipping the remains of a drink to warm her innards as she moved, with incredible herculean powers, sofas and arm-chairs; then having a bit of a read off the film papers, and finally trotting down to see a Lutina Bell film—and now, now there was she, after having been pushed, wrong end over tip by a motor car, sitting, if you please, having a cup of tea with Lutina Bell—in person!

Of course, there wasn't any tea in the cups, for they were pretending-like. It was for the newspapers. Mrs. Durkin was going to be 'took' for the newspapers, together with Lutina Bell. In the same photo. Honest injun, it made you think, it reelly did!

Lutina was ever so sweet to her, just like Mrs. Durkin thought she would be. A perfect lady. One film paper she remembered had called Lutina the first lady of the screen. Mrs. Durkin had liked that—but no more than Lutina Bell-Beets had liked it. Lutina had asked Mrs. Durkin which was her favourite Lutina Bell film, and promptly, without any hesitation, had said *Drifting Sands*. Lutina was pleased about this, because, she said, it was her favourite too (it had, after all, netted her a new contract with a ten thousand pound increase and a percentage of the profits). The newspaper man kept popping their talk down on the back of a medical report and people crowded around the door of the room, and it was all very bewildering and exciting and blinking marvellous.

Then the newspaper man gave the word to the gents with the film cameras, and they made Mrs. Durkin and Lutina hold the tea-cups (which, by the way, were still empty) and look at one another, and then, puff! there was a sudden flash like lightning, which nearly gave Mrs. Durkin palpitations, for no one had warned her about this, and the photo was took.

All the time the newspaper men with their cameras were flashing away with the funny bulbs that went puff! And nurses in the passage were laughing and talking, and it was terribly exciting, and then it was all over and in a never-to-be-forgotten moment, Lutina Bell actually kissed her good-bye. And now they were leading her out along the corridor to the end of it, where she was taken into Room Seven. (Her hat would keep slipping forward over her eyes, but it was very nice of them to buy her new clothes; even if they did smell new and were too large for her.) And there in bed was the man who had knocked her upside-down-wrong-end-up with his motor car, and he was awfully nice, and Mrs. Durkin said it was her fault and he hoped she was all right, and she said she couldn't be better, and, anyway, she was glad he had knocked her down. And he looked surprised at this, because it couldn't have done her any good, he said. But Mrs. Durkin explained that if he hadn't done so, she would never have met Lutina Bell. And the gentleman said that was one way of looking at it. Then they said that there would be an insurance man who would come and see her, something to do with the accident and Mrs. Durkin said that would be very nice. And now, please, did they think she might have a nice hot cup of tea. And, thank Gawd, they did.

Back in Lutina Bell's room, while Duffy was telephoning his story from Sister's room and now that the newspaper photographers had rushed off with their pictures, the C-K-L Publicity Man was attempting to get Lutina to agree to stay at the Hotel Maxime in Park Lane. As, he assured her, it was quite the smartest and the most modern hotel in London. But Lutina Bell now, after all the trouble the C-K-L and Brantling Hospital officials had had to get her to stay at the hospital, did not seem a bit inclined to get up and leave Room Two. As the young man from the Publicity Department talked about the excellent reviews the English director's last production had received, Miss Bell astonished him by asking with, it seemed, no regard for his build-up for her director: "Say, do they have that kids' rhyme about 'It's Nice to get up in the Morning'?"

"Yes, yes, they—er—we—do," he had replied

"Waal," she said, "that's just how I feel."

Really, thought the Publicity man, some stars were impossible; they were all the same if they weren't drunk, then they behaved so stupidly when they were sober that they might just as well be drunk.

"Say—get that screwball Duffy up here, will you?" she asked.

"The—er—Gazette man?"

"Yes, I guess that's what you'd call him, but he's screwball Duffy to me! Say, get him, will you? I wanna ask him to make a 'phone call for me."

The Publicity Man gulped. If Miss Bell was going to telephone that actor in Hollywood and put the call on the bill and C-K-L found out that it was made whilst he was at the hospital and could have prevented it, he thought it would be advisable to clear out, but he was in an awful predicament. He decided to ring the Head of the Studio and seek help and advice.

Duffy hobbled back to Lutina's room. He looked jubilant and more dishevelled than usual.

"You seem pretty pleased with yourself," Lutina remarked, "having turned this nice quiet hospital into a crazy madhouse with your photographers and your old women and——"

"She was sweet, wasn't she?"

"Yeah—a honey. Who dressed her up like a Christmas-tree?"

"I did."

"I might have guessed it!"

"No charge—the *Gazette*'ll foot the bill."

"You might have seen that the darn stuff fitted!"

"No time. She was quite happy though."

"Say, you know something?" Lutina asked.

"What?"

"You made me feel an awful heel."

"Why?"

"Awful. A goddam hypocrite."

"Why?" Duffy repeated.

"Me being nice to the old ducks. And all that glad to give you a little enjoyment. Why, I felt terrible. Say, I haven't written or cabled my folks in years. Will you do me a favour?"

"Sure."

"Well, get me my handbag. I want you to wire a message and some money to my folks in Minneapolis. That's," said Lutina, "if they're still there."

"Glad to," said Duffy, and added: "I think you're a pretty nice person, Miss Bell. If I was twenty years younger and I had any money, I'd propose," he said.

"Thanks. I believe you mean it!"

"I believe I do, too," Duffy told her. "No, I must go down and bribe the Garbo nurse in the Public Ward to get your money sent off."

"Here's the address—I hope it'll reach 'em. It's a fine how-do-you-do when Lutina Bell starts behaving like Snow White."

"Suits you!"

"Thanks, I always did hear the English were gallant, though, come to think of it," added Lutina, "you didn't want to protect me when that Doc. Carlton was going to wallop me again downstairs, did you?"

"No," said Duffy. "As a matter of fact, I thought it might do you a bit of good! Did it?"

"He changed his mind. I turned on the old charm, you know, the Bell technique never fails."

"La Belle Lutina!" said Duffy.

"Ouch! Must you make those sort of cracks? Save 'em for that lousy rag you work for! One thing, about that Doc. Carlton——"

"Yes?"

"Is he married?"

"No, I don't think so."

"That's all I want to know," said Lutina. Duffy looked surprised.

"Well, blow me down!" he remarked. "When are you leaving—I imagine you are leaving?" he added. "Or have you taken this room for the summer season?"

"You never can tell! When are you fixing it so that I can see Carlton operate?"

"Don't worry, I'm using that as a follow-up. One thing about this hospital, it's put my stuff where it belongs—on the front page," said Duffy, and turned when he reached the door. "By the way," he added cheerfully, "there are forty-seven different families called Bell downstairs."

"What do they want?"

"They all claim that you're their long-lost relative."

"Oh, my God!" said Lutina.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

"COLONEL DRAYBRIDGE TO SEE YOU, MRS. DRAYBRIDGE," said Ella Logan.

Colonel Draybridge—so formal. Why not 'Your husband'? Mrs. Draybridge held her breath.

Then Edward entered. And that long-awaited moment with which her future was bound up, was now the present. He came over to her bed, gravely. That tall, upright back, that back which had been held rigid for years now; oh, Edward, could you never relax? Not just once? And then he was kissing her on the forehead, and that handsome, ageing face was close to hers; but not quite close enough.

"How are you, my dear?"

The inevitable routine was to be gone through, then? Had she prayed for this? There had been no light in his eyes when he came in, nothing save that dead, far-away look, the detached look of Colonel Edward Draybridge, formerly of the Indian Army. He was so very true to type, yet these men had vices, most of them, if you could but probe deep enough: women, cards, drink, cruelty . . . but Edward had none of these things. Or had he? Was he cruel? He was cruel; yes, he was cruel, you had to admit that he was cruel. Or, if you were doing something unintentionally; if you were being unkind unintentionally—was that cruelty? What do you want, Edward? What is it that you find lacking that makes this breach so wide between us?

"I've brought you some flowers."

"How nice of you!"

Words! Words! And nothing behind them, not one drop of meaning, words that were strung together formally, in their right order, and yet having as much meaning as if they had been strung out of order. "I've brought you some flowers," "How nice of you." How nice, how nice, Nice, Nice, Nice.

"What have you been doing, dear?"

"Golfing."

Golfing. It was so absurd. It was the sort of thing that should make you laugh. You read about retired Indian Army colonels golfing and glaring at the caddie and smashing the golf sticks and getting into fierce Poona rages. But there were no fierce Poona rages in the heart of Edward Draybridge. He had seen too much rage in his time. Yet there could not be peace? If there was peace, was she not, she, Ethel Draybridge, Mrs. Edward Draybridge, part of that peace? How curious that she had, once, been inside the heart of that man, and when that heart beat it had synchronized with her own, and they had beat as one. And now they were apart and there was no passage to his heart. It was there, but heavily walled up. So heavily walled up that it seemed nothing could be used to prise it open again; she had tried, everything from soft words to fierce iron bars—but that corridor was so tightly filled in that there was no way of forcing it; even God did not seem able to get into Colonel Edward Draybridge's heart.

"I wish I could see an improvement, Dear," he was saying. That, too, was in keeping with his visit. He murmured that, but not with any petulance as if the expense were too great; certainly not with any anxiety as if fearing to lose her. Oh God, I asked you for help and what have you given me? What am I to do? I have tried to fight, I have made all efforts, you know this to be true; what, then, must I do?

"Edward, I wish you loved me again," she said. And wondered, if

indeed, she had said it. Were the words spoken by her, had God spoken them? Were they words put in her mind by God, to be said by her? She wondered and, in thinking, dared not say them. But she must have said them, for Edward was replying. He was frowning and, as if he had known all this for so long, he was saying: "It is silly to talk like that, Ethel. We have known and loved each other. One changes. Times change. Years go by. I—I can't explain it, but don't think too harshly of me, because I cannot put the clock back. . . ."

"Edward," she started, and made herself go on; this was the opportunity she had asked for; this was her last chance, if ever she had to fight, to do something to win him back, it was now. ". . . Edward, what do you want . . . what would make you happy?"

"I'd like to see you well again," he said, and, for a second, her heart leaped in exaltation only to fall deep, lower than before, when she realized that there was no feeling behind the sentence. More words!

"Yes, and when I am well?"

If she had been wrong—if he meant it—now here was a chance indeed for him to prove it.

"Then, when I was sure you were all right, I'd like . . . I think I'd like . . ."

"Yes, Edward?"

"I rather think I'd like to travel—of course, on the absolute assumption that you were all right."

Travel. Alone. Oh God! This is the end!

"Yes, Edward, I see."

But she did not see. How could she see? He wanted his independence. He wanted to wander, a poor lost soul, indefinitely travelling. To forget? But there was nothing to forget. She was forcibly reminded that he wanted to go alone, for he continued: "I'd like to get away and wander about; silly of me, I suppose. I'm tired of being cooped up in England . . . tired of golf and idling about," Edward explained. Or tried to explain.

"Where, Edward?" she asked.

"I rather think I'll go back to India."

"Oh, no! Oh, no, Edward—you can't mean that. You can't mean that. You can't go back there, because you know how I hate it, because you know that I cannot follow you there. Oh, God! But that was it. That was why; the very reason. India, he had chosen India because he knew that he would be left in peace, that she would not follow him, that she would not try to find him if he went back there. Oh, Edward, Edward, how could you be so deathly cruel? . . ."

He was watching her face, but it was expressionless, all save for the eyes. He wished she did not suffer so. How could he explain? Man was an odd creature. He, perhaps, even more moody than others. They had been happy, and man, always the animal, had tired. He had tired of his mate, to put it crudely. Now was that all? There was no one else. He was tired of being himself. He had been himself for so long that, before he died, he would like to go away and not be anyone at all. You could not explain that. You could not tell anyone that. It was too selfish and it was inexplicable. There was no Ethel Draybridge for him any more. He wanted to put that away from him. God knows why. That he could not explain to himself; the rest he could not explain to Ethel. He wanted to know that she was well, and financially that she was all right, and then he wanted to go away. To get back to India. Just why or how or when this urge had come

upon him, he knew not. Just why he could not, did not, want to take Ethel, he was unable to say. Men were like animals. They sought out a female and they cohabited with the female of their choice. They had baby animals and they parted. He had not had children, they weren't anxious for children, not sure where they would be, moving about and so on, and some idea of Ethel's that the children might come between them. And now nothing had come between them, but a vast nothing—and that had been more terrifying, more strong than anything else in the world! If they had had a child perhaps he would not have wanted to be by himself, or, in going, know that at least Ethel would love and cherish and be something to her child. Now, Ethel did not seem to want anything—except the past back. And she should know that the past never came back. She was in love with a memory. You could not face or go through life in love with a memory.

But he did not realize that if she could not have that, Ethel did not want to go through life at all. He had a suspicion, that was all, a faint suspicion in the back of his mind. But he deliberately kept it there and would not let it formulate—he stirred it round now and then, and held the little mess it made in his brain, at the very back of his head, but he would not bring it forward.

"I hope you'll be better soon, dear," he was saying.

"Thank you, Edward." She knew now that she would have to get better, for he would not be able to leave until she was better. And, week after week, the unsaid reproach would be intolerable. When she was well and he had gone, she could be ill again, then, with him gone, with his wish fulfilled, she would be able to be ill and know that she did not have to get well. She was far more alone than he would ever be, but he was not alone really; for he wished to be alone, and you were only alone when you had no wish to be.

He bent down and kissed her on the forehead. And she wanted to take his hand and grip it tightly, but she knew that he feared she would, and he did not want it. He hated scenes. And she knew that it would not have been any good anyway. It was spring outside, and at Worthing the little house . . .

"Good-bye, my dear! I'll be back on the Second." As usual, he might have added. Meanwhile the flowers would arrive, as usual. And she'd count the hours, as usual. And she'd pray, as usual. But this time, she knew, she had to get better. For he had asked her for his freedom, and she had to give him that, for she would give him everything. She always had. Perhaps that was why she had lost him. Lost the only thing in life she wanted to retain.

He had gone, and Mrs. Draybridge turned her face to the wall.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

TOMMIE WALKED ALONG THE CORRIDOR TO THE PRIVATE WARD, WHISTLING contentedly. He was happy, materialistically and physically. He had come to collect his cheque for 'The Things You Say', and he was going to see Miranda Stewart. He tapped on the door of Room Three,

and awaited Mike's "Come in". It was more of a very fierce command and it was obvious before Tommie entered that Mike was in a bad temper.

He glared at Tommie when Tommie drew up a chair and cheerfully asked: "How are you today, Mr. Mahoon?" He was so pleased with himself that he nearly called Mahoon 'Mike'—it was, perhaps, fortunate that he did not do this, for Mike, surveying him with utter disapproval, said: "So I guess you've come for your cheque, huh?" He was so nasty about it that Tommie blinked in astonishment before replying: "Yes, you told me to come for it today."

"Yeah, yeah, so I told you to come for it today," mimicked Mike.

"Well, didn't you?" questioned Tommie; what was the matter with Mike, anyway?

"Yeah, heah—oh, sure, sure, I told you to come today all right, though I wish to God I wasn't lying on a sick-bed!" He glared beligerently at Tommie. The mystery deepened; Mike was as good as intimating that he would knock Tommie's block off. Tommie, in spite of his surprise, was inwardly amused; for he had seen some of Mike's pseudo-toughness before. It consisted of a great deal of loud, war-like noises, a number of expletives and a great deal of sparring around that, when challenged, was swiftly dropped in favour of a quick negotiated peace by discussion. Mike Mahoon!

"What's the matter, Mr. Mahoon?"

"What's the matter! You've got a goddam nerve."

"Why?"

"Why! You're a smart one—you two-timing little rat, you!"

"I'm not going to stand for that—tell me what's the trouble."

"As if you didn't know."

"Well, I don't know—you're just talking a lot of drivel."

"Oh, I am, am I? It may be drivel to you, you two-timing cheap chissler, but it isn't drivel to me. You've got a ruddy nerve coming in here for your money—a ruddy nerve."

"Nevertheless," Tommie replied hotly, "I still want to know what the hell you're talking about, and I still want my cheque."

"Like hell you do. You dirty little double-crosser!"

"What is all this double-cross business? What am I supposed to have done?"

"'Supposed' is good. What *have* you done, you mean—there's no suppose about it. And too ruddy chickenhearted to come yourself!" Tommie looked completely perplexed.

"That's right, pretend it's all one big mystery. Why, you dirty little rat, I've a good mind to pop you one, hospital bed or no hospital bed!" said Mike, in a lather of rage, his ugly jaw sticking out in pugilistic fury.

"And I *will* pop you one, hospital bed or no hospital bed, if you don't stop calling me names!" said Tommie dangerously. Mike's mood quickly changed.

"Oh, so you will, will you? A nice, friendly clean sort of a guy, huh? Double-crosses his pal and then takes a sock at him while he's lying on a sick-bed—unable to hit back!"

"Oh, you make me sick," said Tommie. "Pay me what you owe me and let me get out of here!"

"Pay you? Like hell I will!" Mike replied.

"Why not?" Tommie asked.

"You gotta goddamned nerve! You gotta nerve!" exclaimed Mike

in mock admiration. "You're so twisted you pick your teeth with corkscrews."

"I don't pick my teeth—so you can cut out the wisecracks."

"And you can get the hell out of my bedroom!"

"Not before I get my money and you tell me what the mystery's all about."

"Sending a dame in here. Doing your stuff in *my* hospital behind *my* back—pretending you've come to see me and all the time giving some poor little virgin the big run-around!" sneered Mike.

"Miranda Stewart?"

"I shouldn't be surprised. Come off it, puppy-fat, I wasn't born yesterday."

"What about her?—I met her the first day I called—but I got into the wrong room——"

"Of course you did. Yeah. Just like a French farce!"

"What about her, anyway?"

"What about her! You broke your contract with me, and you have the sauce to come here and ask for your money—that's a hot one. You come in here and give me that crap."

"Did Miranda Stewart come in here?"

"She did. Contrary to all regulations—so they tell me—didn't do her stitches no good, neither!" sneered Mike, and Tommie, for a brief moment, was drenched in a sudden sweat. What had she done, the crazy fool, if she'd gone and mucked up her operation . . .

"But don't give me that wide-eyed innocence, Graves," continued Mike, "you double-crossed me—if you wanted to quit you could have said so—not sent in a bit of a grumble you'd picked up in my hospital."

"Look here, Mahoon!" warned Tommie.

"Take it easy, or I'll have you thrown out!" warned Mike, reaching for the bell at the head of the bed.

"Come on, tell me what happened. If you were rude to Miss Stewart——"

"Miss Stewart—Destry rides again! Cut out the hero act, Graves. You're fired, leastways, you quit—and I accepted your resignation—now you get the hell out of here and go back to that lousy passenger boat I took you from—get back into the gutter!" concluded Mike, melodramatically. Tommie had stood enough; he tried a little of the Mahoon bluff and advanced menacingly towards the bed. Immediately up shot Mike's hand for the bell.

"I warn you!" he shouted.

"What did Miss Stewart say to you?" Tommie demanded.

"You know goddam' well what she said," replied Mike. "She came in here and said you'd quit, that you weren't going to write any more of my songs," he continued.

Tommie gasped. Miranda did that!

"And furthermore, she insulted me, and I'll take her to court! Coming in here and calling me a dirty crook! I'll take her to court! I've got a good name to think of—fine thing if Lady Leftcart-Spratling in Six hears about this—who the hell does this Stewart bitch think she is?" Mike blustered on, but stopped when Tommie moved right up to him and grabbed at his pyjama coat, screwed it up so that he had a tight grip on Mike, and said with quiet intensity: "Another remark like that and I'll give you some reason for being in this hospital!" Mike breathed loudly through his nose and wet his lips. "You lemme go," he shouted; "you lemme alone! I ain't done nuffin'!" All

traces of that historic Bronx accent had disappeared. "I told you, like I said, your gel come in 'ere an' was bloody rude to me—she called me a crook."

"So you are!"

"Don't you talk to me like that, and leave go of me!"

The transformation was pathetic. The little squirt! thought Tommie; it made you sick to watch it. All bluff—all hot air and full of vinegar and fight—until he was challenged, and then a sniffing little frightened weasel.

"I'll leave go when you pay me the money for 'The Things You Say'."

"All right, all right, but I'll have the police on you for assault."

"I don't give a dam' about that—come on!" said Tommie aggressively. Mike slipped a hand into his pyjama coat and, in a body belt that he wore around his chest, there was a pocket containing five-pound notes. He took out two fivers and Tommie let go of him. "Seven pounds ten—it was—gimme change now," he whined.

"I've only got two quid," said Tommie, throwing them down on the bed. "I'll send you the ten bob."

"Mind you do, Graves—and, mind, I haven't finished with you yet—or your girl!"

"No—but I've finished with you!" Tommie replied.

"Going in to see strange girls when you're on my pay roll," said Mike querulously, "that's a fine way to treat a pal! That's a fine way to treat the man who gave you your big chance!"

"Oh yes—a fat chance I had with you giving me a few measly bob while you drew in fat cheques for my songs—and you took the credit!" flashed back Tommie.

"You were satisfied!" whined Mike. It had been true.

Tommie nodded: "Yep. I was satisfied, because I had no guts, I suppose, because I was hard up and anxious to get on and I'd have sat thumping out song hits for you until I was an old man—still getting your measly little wage—whilst you were picking my brain. Miss Stewart was right! You're a dirty little basket—and I'm glad I'm free! Good-bye!" Tommie slammed the door. It was all too much for the pugnacious Mike; he burst into tears.

In Room Five, Miranda looked apprehensively at Tommie's flushed face. He stood there, just looking at her. . . .

"Are you very angry?" she asked. There was silence for a moment. "Why did you do it?" he asked. She couldn't yet tell if he was annoyed.

"Because," she explained, "well, you wouldn't, and you'd have let him ride you for years, and, well, I'll be leaving here soon and I didn't know how long he'd be here—and it was important that immediate action was taken, and you've got to make decisions and I promise I'll pay all your expenses until you land a good job in a music publishing place—or until you sell one of your own songs—" She tried to find out what he was thinking by his face, but she couldn't tell, and she hurried on, hoping that speed would help her cause—"and I know what you'll say," she continued, "that you won't take money from a woman, but we're quite well-off and we won't miss it, and, anyway, it's mine, my allowance, and I can do what I like with it, and, well, anyway, don't you see, it'll only be a loan and you're your own boss, and know you'll write wonderful songs. . . ." Her voice tailed off, and she looked at him and her eyes faltered and looked away for a moment.

Then, when she looked again, he was smiling at her, and she knew it was all right.

"Darling," he said. He had called her Darling.

... Mr. Gidney tapped discreetly on the door of Room Four, and, there being no reply, and fearing that he might disturb her if she were asleep, Mr. Gidney turned to leave Mrs. Draybridge's room, but he thought, as he turned, he heard a sob, a shattering, soul-disturbing sob. And, for so quiet and so meek a man, he was resolved to enter, even though he knew Mrs. Draybridge would not like it. He was glad he had gone in; for she lay, as was her custom, looking at the ceiling, and the tears swarmed down her face and great gulps choked her throat. Mr. Gidney went over to her, and she tried to motion him away, but he still continued towards her. And her cries of "Please leave me. Please leave me alone. I can't see anyone today." But Mr. Gidney went up to the bed, and he bent down and kissed the wet, tear-stained face. "Have courage," he said, and he walked slowly out of the room. And his eyes were shining very brightly, and, if a nurse had passed him at that moment, she might have suspected that Mr. Gidney was crying, too. But Mr. Gidney was very, very happy, for at last, at long last, Mrs. Draybridge had finally 'broken'; the long days and nights of pent-up emotion, of pride, of incredible endurance and solitary unhappiness had, at last, in one final unhappy moment for her, been let loose, at last, hit the fact that Mrs. Draybridge was crying her very soul awake. But that, thought Mr. Gidney, was the first thing that had happened to her for years.

... In Toom Two, Lutina Bell was preparing to leave. At last the C-K-L Publicity Man had persuaded her to take the large car he had awaiting her in the hospital grounds and go with him to the Hotel Maxime on Park Lane. Duffy was saying good-bye, and was promising that he would come down to Denham to watch her filming on his first day out of hospital. Lutina held out her hands to shake his. Duffy put his hand out to take hers. He felt something hard in her hand, and looked down to see that he was holding a neat wrist-watch.

"Souvenir," explained Lutina, shyly, "and my thanks!" she added. Duffy looked at the watch and shook his head. "You shouldn't have done that . . ." he started, delighted at her consideration.

"Forget it!" she said.

"Ready, Miss Bell?" asked the C-K-L Publicity Man obsequiously, but anxious to get going.

"Sure, sure," said Lutina; she'd given Ella Logan a large wad of notes to share among the nurses—Ella had arranged for the purchase of Duffy's watch, for her—and everyone was sorry to see her go. As the Canadian, Grant, remarked: "She came in like a lion and is going out like a lamb."

Then, as Lutina gave a last look round the room, and remarked: "I'm sorry to leave the old cell—I sorta enjoyed my stay here—the prisoner ate a hearty——" Plump Nurse Morgan entered sniffing. It was the only time in her long period at Brantling that she had not been seen smiling. "Telephone call for you, Miss Bell," she said. "In Sister's Room—I'll show you."

"Whatever's the matter with you?" Lutina asked

"I d-don't want you to leave," said the soulful Morgan.

Lutina patted her hand. "Gee, that's sweet of you," she said; 'matter of fact I'm sorta hating to go myself!" She looked at Duffy. "Call for me? . . . Say, did you? . . ." Duffy grinned. Lutina hurried out to Sister's Room.

"Hallo?" she said.

"Hallo—Miss Bell?"

Her heart pounded within her. "Hallo, Doc!" she said.

"I'm just telephoning to see if everything is all right," said Nick Carlton.

"Sure, sure. Everything's fine," Lutina replied.

"Good," said Nick. There was a pause. Lutina certainly didn't know what to say, except how glad she was that he had telephoned, but, somehow, she didn't see how she could say that. Maybe he knew it, anyway.

"Oh, by the way," added 'Old Nick', "I hear you want to see me operate."

"Yep, I do!" Lutina replied simply.

"You won't like it. You'll be ill."

"I can take it."

"Yes, I suppose if anyone can, you can!" he replied.

"Say, is that a crack?" Lutina asked. She heard his soft laugh the other end of the telephone; somehow all the romantic thoughts that had swirled around her at the mention of the film actor, Jan Sebastian, had disappeared as fast as they had arrived. Jan Sebastian had not even lasted the customary six weeks in Lutina Bell's affection. It was doubtful if anyone now could last six weeks in the affection of Lutina Bell. It was, however, possible that all that and more had been replaced for the first time by something that was more than mere affection, sex, friendship or . . . ?

"When do I see you . . ." she asked, and added, though both of them knew that the word was superfluous ". . . operate?"

"If you are not busy," Nick replied, "I suggest—tomorrow."

Lutina smiled happily at the telephone. "I'll be at the Maxime. Will you ring me?"

"Yes," he said. "Good-bye now," she said, and wanted to add: "I can hardly wait, my Sweet."

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

DUFFY ENTERED ARTHUR LANE'S ROOM, AND, SITTING DOWN, MOPPED his brow with the end of his dressing-gown girdle and breathed hard. "Phew! Another job scrubbed off the slate," he remarked, and added woefully: "To think that such an innocent lad as I used to be should have turned out to be such an accomplished liar!"

"Blame your journalistic training!" suggested Arthur. "I've never yet given a statement to the papers that hasn't been altered unrecognizably to suit their own nefarious purposes."

"Don't start trying to impress me with long words, Mr. Lane—I

admit I'm a man of no education," Duffy replied, "and I'm proud of it."

"What's happened—you're usually too cheerful to live," Arthur asked. "I'm glad to see you almost normal, and not so excessively exuberant."

"I have," explained Duffy, "just been telling forty-seven vehement people by the name of Bell that the famous Lutina Bell is *not* their first cousin."

"Why?" asked Arthur.

"Why isn't she their first cousin, or why were they vehement?" asked Duffy.

"I don't know," Arthur grinned.

"Don't sit there and blandly say 'I don't know'—of course *you've* nothing on *your* conscience," Duffy continued sarcastically, "you only ran over a poor innocent old woman who was attempting to cross a road——"

"I apologized, didn't I?" Arthur butted in, still smiling at him.

"—While I have to look people right in the eye and say shockingly untrue things—I'm surprised my hair doesn't stand on end—that is," Duffy added quickly, before Arthur had the chance to say ahead of him "—if I had any hair!"

"I'm still trying to puzzle out why you had to tell forty-seven people by the name of Bell——" Arthur began, but Duffy interrupted with: "And I'm still trying to tell you if you had any breeding at all, you'd buy the *Gazette* and read my story; however, since you want to save the penny I'll tell you; I very rashly explained to our one and a quarter million readers that Lutina Bell's first reason for choosing Brantling General Hospital for her minor operation was that she was looking for her long-lost relatives."

"I see—hence all the Bells!"

"Exactly."

"So?"

"So—unfortunately Miss Lutina Bell's real name is Beets."

"What?"

"Yes, you heard me—Bell is a *nom de guerre*—Beets is something much worse, but, nevertheless, her own! I'm relying on you to see this goes no further," Duffy continued in mock seriousness. Arthur nodded.

"I'll take it to my grave," he replied.

"I'll be off tomorrow, I think," Duffy said, and continued: "Quite a few of us up here are on the way out—Five and Six are only short-time patients, and Mahoon—God's gift to the song writers—isn't here for long. Lutina left today from Room Three. You'll soon have the run of the place. Sorry it's such a long job for you." He pointed to Arthur's broken arm and leg.

"I don't care. Good thing just to lie and think."

"What the hell for?"

"Well, you've got me there, pal! I don't know."

"Stupidest thing in the world. Always regret it."

"What—thinking?"

"Naturally—far too many other important things to do in life," Duffy told him. "Well, if you must think—don't think too hard—remember everything's relative!" He winked. "We'll meet again on some race-track or other, and I'll shout down from the Press box and say: 'Wotcher, Lane!' and I'll turn to the other drunks and say: 'Lane and I are old pals'—but for God's sake wave back—or my reputation's

gone!" Duffy continued. "My colleagues think I'm no end of a chap!"

"I've never known a man talk so much and say so little!" Arthur remarked.

"That," said Duffy, "is an art. So long! I'll be in to say cheerio before I leave for the peace and quiet of the *Gazette* Editorial Room—it's a cemetery compared with this joint." He waved a cheery farewell and hobbled out. Arthur waved with his one 'good' hand. Duffy had thought out the best way to live, he supposed—for Duffy! No ties, no worries—just live for the day; don't think about tomorrow; there was a lot to that—if you could do it. Arthur wasn't the type, unfortunately. He wished that he was. Cynthia had suggested that Fate had brought them together at Brantling; that meant that Cynthia wanted them to be brought together. But, then, that proved nothing, because he knew that Cynthia had always wanted him to remain by her side, just as, indeed, she also wanted Robert—a kind of design for living; and that wasn't possible to Arthur Lane. Therefore—what? One had to think about it, one couldn't do a 'Duffy' in a situation like that. One could only think in as detached a way as possible under the circumstances. At that moment Cynthia herself came in to see him.

"I'm leaving shortly," she said, "though I'll be coming down to see you, Arthur. I'm sorry we didn't time our operations to end simultaneously. Though," she added, "if you count my first one, I expect we probably would have come out the same day."

"Did your cocktail party go off all right?"

"Yes. It was grand. Nice of the Sister to let me hold it."

"No bitchy remarks?"

"No. Except, of course, Wileen Willoughbie; she made it quite obvious that I'd come down here to be near you and was, of course, hot-footing it back to London to tell all—in a very nice way, of course, to Robert."

Arthur frowned. "Doesn't that complicate things for you?" he asked. Cynthia shook her head. "Robert knows that I'm very fond of you——"

"What an awful word—'fond'—ugh!"

"Well, that I have a Thing about you——"

"That's worse!" said Arthur.

"Nuts!" said Cynthia. "Anyway, Robert isn't the jealous kind."

"How often that's been said!"

"Well, he isn't. And, anyway, here I am. The main thing is that everyone accepted the fact that I've been here all the time, and that's the important thing. Thanks for your help, Arthur," she added, in a different tone.

"What did you expect me to do—shout it out from the roof tops—just because it wasn't me?"

"Of course not, but—oh, I don't know, except that I could have understood if you had."

"Very feminine idea."

"Well, as I've said——"

"Now, don't let's have all that again!" Arthur interrupted.

"What about us?" Cynthia asked.

"We've also had all that out before," Arthur replied.

"It wasn't very satisfactory, was it?"

"It was as satisfactory as was possible under the circumstances!"

"Oh, you're impossible!" Cynthia told him.

"That's what I feel about you—so we'd better leave it just as it was before we came into Brantling," Arthur suggested.

"Won't you try and see my point of view? People have so few friends in this world," she began.

"We're still friends."

"Yes, but . . ." she hesitated. What was the use, they were both determined to stick to their own view-point; it was pure incompatibility of temperament. She shrugged her shoulders. "All right," she said, and left him. He watched her go, and wanted to stop her, and yet couldn't somehow. . . .

Margie Trimmings came on duty in a more cheerful frame of mind; Ada had given her a very good prescription, and could guarantee that Margie would be all right. Ada knew, she'd had a similar experience herself. And, although Margie had lost the twenty quid (plus three pound ten of her own) she had made off Lutina Bell, she was now in possession of certain information that should, no doubt, rectify that sudden drop in her financial status. Oh yes; she'd been very wise to hang on to Brantling for a little longer period. Quite definitely. She was quite herself again. Gone was the worry about the possible embarrassment arising out of the 'Threepenny Spookie' episode; gone was her irritation at the loss of her money—Margie was an opportunist—there was still little Mike Mahoon (though, if Ada was right about that prescription, it would mean that she wouldn't have to frame-up Mike the way she fully intended if the worst came to the worst). There was also Arthur Lane, and there was, indeed, the Lady Cynthia Leftcart-Spratling. . . . She hurried on duty.

"Gosh—what's happened?" Nurse Morgan asked. "You're early, aren't you, my goodness!"

"Am I?" Margie said in feigned surprise.

"Wonders never cease!" continued Morgan. "P'raps your watch stopped."

"Didn't think of looking," said Margie. "By the way, has the wonderful film star gone yet?"

"Yes, but why are you being so catty—look what she left us——" Morgan displayed between a podgy thumb and forefinger three one-pound notes. "For you, too, I expect—she left this note for you. Here!" She had a pencilled envelope on which, in large round childish writing, was scrawled hastily *Night Nurse*. Margie took it and opened it; it read: *I've got to hand it to you—it's not often I meet someone smarter than myself! Lutina Bell.* There were three notes. Well, she wasn't such a bad 'un after all. Not many people would have done that after being gypped out of twenty quid. The thought of the twenty pounds brought Margie back to her immediate objective. "Number Six gone yet?" she asked.

"No, after supper."

"Oh!" There was a hint of pleasure in Margie's voice.

"Too bad, you'll have to give her one more meal!" Morgan told her.

"I could always choke her!" said Margie brightly, and moved out as if to make a slow tour of the rooms; instead, once out of eyesight, she made swiftly for Cynthia's room.

"Hallo, Nurse, I'm afraid I haven't left yet," said Cynthia. "You green-eyed, red-headed bitch," thought Margie.

"I'm sorry you reported me," said Margie in a contrite voice, a voice that surprised Cynthia.

"I'm sorry too. I thought about it for a long time and felt that it might help the next poor patient who had this room. Sister promised me she wouldn't punish you," said Cynthia, pleased to be master of the situation.

"Thank you," said Margie quietly. 'This was odd behaviour,' thought Cynthia, and was soon to know the reason, for Margie suddenly inquired: "Have you enjoyed Brantling as much as the Craven-Ashleigh?"

Cynthia's eyes widened. "What's that?" she faltered.

"I asked you if you liked this hospital as much as the little nursing-home you were in before you came here," said Margie in obvious delight.

"I—er—you—who told you?" Cynthia asked her. Margie watched her sudden and complete discomfort with relish. "It's funny how the darkest secret gets about sometimes, isn't it?" she said.

"What—what do you mean?" Cynthia said defiantly.

"You went to the Craven-Ashleigh before you came here—you only had your tonsils guillotined here as a ruse so that people would think this was where you'd been for the last six weeks——"

"How dare you!" said Cynthia.

"You've just had an illegal operation," Margie continued calmly. "You've just had an abortion, haven't you?"

CHAPTER THIRTY

"OH!" SAID THE LADY CYNTHIA LEFTCART-SPRATLING, GOING EVEN paler than usual, and looking at Margie as if Margie had given her a very swift kick in the groin. Margie smiled complacently back at her. "You dirty little swine," said Cynthia bitterly.

"I know," Margie remarked. "It's my nature. So sorry this should be such a shock for you—but you can trust little Margie. I know you wouldn't want anyone else to hear about it. There's only one thing I wanted to ask you before you left—and that's quite a small matter."

"What is it?" asked Cynthia with quiet venom.

"Well, I've spent rather a lot this month, and I wondered if you could possibly loan me twenty pounds?" suggested Margie.

"Why—you—this is blackmail!" said Cynthia furiously.

"What nonsense! That's got nothing to do with the fact that you were at the Craven-Ashleigh, having an abortion," Margie replied cheerfully. "I know you're fairly wealthy, and I thought you might like to help me—it's only a temporary loan."

"I'm awfully sorry we can't help you," said a man's voice from the door. Margie swung round, and Cynthia looked in the direction of the voice in pleased surprise. The newcomer was a tall, wide-shouldered man with a short, clipped moustache.

"Who are you? Why don't you knock at the door?" said Margie in a frightened voice. "Visitors aren't allowed here after six."

"I'm not exactly a visitor," said Robert. "I've merely called to take Lady Cynthia home. I hope you don't mind?" he added, sarcastically. "There won't be any extra charge for that—will there?" he asked cynically.

"I don't know what you're talking about. We were having a friendly chat——"

"Bit too friendly, if you ask me——" Robert continued. "Didn't I hear you say something about the Craven-Ashleigh?"

"Well, what about it?" flashed Margie.

"Nothing, except that I shall make a point of finding out who blabbed here and have them fired as well as you."

"I don't care."

"No?"

"You've got nothing on me," continued Margie spitefully, "and I've got plenty on her!" she pointed at Cynthia.

"Oh, no, you haven't, because the lady is going to be my wife," replied Robert quietly. "And as we both agreed that a baby before the specified time would only give our friends a lot of worry trying to calculate when we decided to have it, we thought it best not to go through with it. You can tell whom you like about that, because we propose getting married next week, and I doubt if your information's really worth such a lot—certainly not twenty pounds. Now get out!"

In a fury, Margie, after a pause during which she would dearly have loved to have got her hands on Cynthia, turned and went out quickly. Robert turned and winked solemnly at Cynthia. "Charming girl," he said. "Where did you meet her?" With trembling hands, Cynthia dabbed a little of Dana's *Tabu* behind her ears and tried to compose herself. "Sweet little number, isn't she?" Cynthia gave her hat a shove so that it slanted over her left eye, giving her a Cyclopean touch. "Awfully glad you arrived when you did. I'd have given her the money out of pure funk."

"Well, that's twenty quid you owe me?" said Robert with a smile. "Here, give me your suitcase."

"Do you think she'll make trouble?"

"Not now—and anyway, we are going to get married, aren't we?" said Robert.

"I begin to suspect that you and that cow had this thing all worked out," said Cynthia.

"Yes—nice timing on my part, don't you think?" Robert remarked. "I arrived in the nick of time and *without* the United States Marines!"

"You ought to have brought the Marines—you're going to need them."

"Why?"

"Because we are now going to see Arthur."

"How is he?"

"Next door—doing an impersonation of Nelson—one arm, one leg, and a broken nose."

"Nelson, my Poppet, had one arm and one eye, and none of my books mentions a broken nose, but if you can assure me that——"

"Never mind about it now," said Cynthia, feeling more herself, "let's go and see Arthur." They moved off with Robert carrying Cynthia's suitcase.

"That woman's here again!" Cynthia said when they went in to see Arthur.

"Hallo, Arthur, how are you?" Robert asked.

"I'm progressing," Arthur said; "like to paint the throat with a little liquor?"

"No, thanks."

"He's just saved me from a fate worse than death!" Cynthia told Arthur.

"Well, that's a change—I thought it was because he didn't save you that you went to the Craven-Ashleigh!" said Arthur.

"Always the little comic, our Arthur."

"What happened?"

"The sweet little Scotch nurse tried to borrow twenty quid from me—her subscription to the quartette—the We Know Where Cynthia's Been Club," Cynthia explained.

"How did she find out?"

"Someone at the nursing-home—anyway, it's all over now and Robert saved the day," Cynthia explained.

"Tell him how I saved the day," Robert requested.

"No, he'd probably throw a splint at me!"

"Hospital has made me tolerant. Go on!" said Arthur.

"I told the nurse that Cynthia and I were getting married next week—she seemed to think that excused our over-zealousness in popping into bed ahead of schedule," said Robert, and added: "I say, can I have an apple?"

"Yes, do," Arthur replied. "So?"

"So nothing," said Cynthia, "because I suggested that Robert had better come in here and tell you what he'd said and you'd give him a punch in the jaw and we could all go and dine at the Mirabelle."

"Or Claridges?"

"Or the Berkeley Butt?"

But Arthur looked thoughtfully at his broken leg.

"Have you got a lot of stuff up your nose, or is it your coloured blood that gives them such a wide spread?" Robert asked, between large chunks of the fast-disappearing apple.

"It's a long thin bandage dipped in some muck or other to heal it," Arthur explained, still looking at his leg, and added: "When's the happy day?"

"That's just it! Robert is a little light-headed; I think it's the spring—he always gets a bit of wind in his tail this time of the year."

"Nevertheless, it isn't a bad idea, is it?" said Robert.

"Except that if I married you, Arthur with whom I have had a violent *affaire*, as everyone who is anyone knows, for the last three years, will go off and sulk and shoot tigers in Africa—to forget!"

"What part of Africa?"

"I don't know, the *darkest*. Won't you, Arthur?" said Cynthia. Arthur looked up from his long contemplation of his 'gammy' leg.

"I shouldn't be at all surprised," he said.

"Who cares about Arthur?" Robert asked, carefully balancing the apple core on the top of the medicine bottle cork.

"That's just it—I do!" said Cynthia. "And, anyway, I don't see why, if I refused to marry Arthur, I should turn round and marry you, Robert!"

"Except that you've been blackmailed into it. If you don't marry me," said Robert, pretending to twirl that absurdly short, well-clipped moustache, "that Scottish nurse and I will tell the world of your sin!"

"Pool!" said Cynthia.

"The trouble with Cynthia is that she's lecherous," Arthur explained.

"That's it," said Cynthia, giving her hat another tug over the left eye, "that's me—all over."

"—And I'm a prude!" Arthur continued. "So, you see, we've reached a deadlock."

"Holy Deadlock!" said Cynthia, and added: "I say, isn't that rather good?"

"Very," said Robert in a tired voice, "except that A. P. Herber thought of it—about ten years ago."

"Oh—I thought I was being original," said Cynthia.

"Only in your social outlook."

"And even that was covered by Coward in *Design for Living*," added Arthur.

"Seeing as how you two boys seem to have formed an Anti-Cynthia League, I'd better ring up Jumbo, who's dying to marry me, and leave you two together."

"Seriously, Arthur—what about it—if Cynthia and I want to get married—does that make such a lot of difference to you?" asked Robert, who had stopped roaming around the room, and now, at the foot of the bed, faced Arthur and awaited his reply; but Cynthia interrupted by sitting carefully away from Arthur's leg and patting it, and said: "Just a minute now. As is so typical of Robert, he has assumed that I want to marry him. I think he just got the idea into his head when that nurse tried to pull a quick one. He'll forget it tomorrow."

"No—had it for days," said Robert, "surprised myself, even!"

"Awfully nice of you," said Cynthia sarcastically. "Nevertheless," she continued, "you know, Arthur, I believe the idiot has hit on a solution."

"What do you mean?" Arthur asked, wrinkling his brow.

"Look!" said Cynthia, pointing at Arthur's furrowed brow. "He looks exactly like Spencer Tracy when he does that, and I adore Spencer Tracy!"

"That reminds me, where's this film star I read about today?" Robert began.

"You're too late, she's gone," said Cynthia over her shoulder at Robert. "What I mean is," she continued, turning back to Arthur, "is that really, it does look as if I shall have to marry Robert in order to keep you both!"

"On the assumption that if you marry Robert I won't object, but I will object if you live together?" said Arthur.

"That's right, my little Poppet."

"I've never heard such dam' rot in my life," Arthur replied, but without conviction.

"I think it's a wonderful idea," remarked Robert.

"Of course it is; Arthur has an acute possession complex: I'm sure if I'm legally yours, Robert, he'll be quite pleased to accept our week-end invitations."

"Of course he will," said Robert, "especially if there is a chance of playing a little footie under the table with you at dinner-time, dear!"

Arthur wrinkled his brow again. "That's just the trouble," he said, "you don't trust this red-headed minx, do you?"

"Good God—no!"

"There you are then," said Cynthia cheerfully; "then it's all settled!"

Arthur looked at Robert and shook his head. "Women," he remarked, "are wonderful!"

"Very original, my sweet," said Cynthia, stooping down to kiss him on the cheek. "Mind my hat. I've spent a long time getting the correct Beatty tilt to it."

"You smell nice," he said.

"Always protect yourself in the *cliches*!" she remarked.

"So long, Arthur," said Robert.

"We will be down—no, I will be down the day after tomorrow," said Cynthia.

"There you are!" said Robert. "She's started already, notice the way she quickly changed the 'we' to 'I'? What about that nurse, won't you be scared?"

"Not now that my virtue is to be defended—and I'm to be Queen of the May!" said Cynthia. "Don't leave my suitcase in here," she continued, "or you'll be giving poor Sister a lot of awful ideas. 'Bye now, darling," she said to Arthur, "see you the day after tomorrow. Yes?"

The yes was, in reality, her effort to determine if he thought that they had reached a solution. It was so utterly crazy, so completely typical of Cynthia, and so completely one-sidedly feminine that he made his "Yes" as disapproving and non-committal as possible. Nevertheless he had a peculiar feeling deep down inside him that, in spite of its foolishness, it was going to work.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

IN THE NURSES' COMMON ROOM THE DAY STAFF WERE PREPARING FOR their varying nocturnal pastimes. Ella Logan was bustling about trying to be ready to catch the whole programme of the pictures at the Imperial Cinema. Nurse Grant, playing some new hot records, tried to persuade Morgan that there was absolutely no reason for her to 'Ha-ha' throughout the vocal refrains. Nurse Jenkins was going to dine with one of the doctors, though she thought none of the others knew this; however, it was, of course, soon flashed through the wards when he had suggested it in a too-audible *sotto voce* in the X-Ray Theatre early in the day. Daphne Short was torn between joining Ella at the Pictures or proceeding with her 'homework'. There was a certain amount of logic in Ella's suggestion that she would get 'stale' if she didn't stop cramming all that medical knowledge down her throat. Ella was sure that Daphne would come through the exam all right; that she had every chance of success. This, however, only spurred Daphne into thoughts of making that final effort and staying home, and all Ella's earlier remarks about "needing a change", and "You enjoyed the dance, didn't you?" were to be wasted, had not Jenkins remarked: "It's James Stewart—you'd better not miss it!" And that settled it—for Daphne Short, James Stewart was by far the best of the film stars, for whom, it is feared, she had in most cases a certain amount of contempt. James Stewart seemed to be more dependable than the others, and a girl, thought Daphne, needed dependability.

Evelyn Charteris was going out with Lily Fraser, the Day Nurse, to the local Concert Party on the Pier which had just commenced its summer season. As yet, too early for the holiday crowds, the show was by no means crowded, and the manager, in an effort to help the atmosphere and to get the patrons talking about it being 'ever so full', had presented the cast with some complimentary seats, and, as they termed it, was going to 'paper' the season into success. Two of these complimentary tickets had arrived for Evelyn Charteris.

As they hurried to get ready, they chatted and laughed and argued and vied one with another to look the prettiest. Gone, for a few hours, were clean shining faces and the smell of carbolic soap. Gone, until duty next morning, were low heels and cotton stockings and neat, taut uniforms; in place of the emblem of their craft was individual clothing; two-piece tailored suits, cocktail frocks, dinner dresses, spring frocks and hats that only women found attractive. Masks comprising face cream, base powders, lipstick, eye shading, cheek bloom and eyelid shading had taken the place of the faces that belonged to the Misses Jenkins, Morgan, Charteris, Grant, Fraser—even Daphne Short and Ella Logan.

"Lissen, are you going to be in all the evening?" Grant asked Morgan.

"Now do I look as if I'm going to be in all the evening?" countered Morgan, indicating with obvious pleasure her new 'number'.

"Yes!" said Grant, unkindly.

"Well, I'm not."

"The sooner you scam out of here, the better I'll like it," said Grant, "though God knows I'm not staying in. There's a fellow with a car coming all the way from Seabridge to take me for a ride. Oh, for heaven's sake stop that ha-ha-ing!" she added, as Morgan helped the disc vocalist to get through the refrain.

"You know what to do if the seat suddenly collapses and you find yourself on the floor?" Jenkins asked her.

"Oh, sure," said Grant quickly. "Remember what my doctor told me."

"Come on, kiddie, we'll miss the news," said Ella. "I hate being late, I like to see the whole programme, don't you?"

"Well, I'm going for a walk," said Jenkins firmly. No one contradicted this, though Lily Grant whistled disbelievingly. "We'll walk to the end of the road with you," said Evelyn, winking at Lily Fraser, "we're going on the Pier."

"Don't bother—in any case, I can't stand Morgan's row any longer," Jenkins replied, and quickly left.

"There you are—I'm not the only one who thinks you're lousy," said Grant, scowling at Morgan. Morgan stopped her singing and exclaimed petulantly: "Well, don't put the records on if you don't want us to enjoy them!"

"So long!" said Evelyn; she and Fraser went off to the Pier.

Nurse Grant's record continued, only to be interrupted by Morgan again. It was good to have a nice Welsh voice, and only right that you should use the gifts that God gave you. Of course, hymns gave you a better chance, you could hold on to notes far longer, these jazz tunes were all too much of a rush. Still, it was good to be able to do both, sort of vary your range. It was quite possible that if ever she got fed up with hospitals, she could get a job crooning with a snappy band. So thought Morgan as she sang with occasional glances into the mirror

over the fireplace Nurse Grant groaned and dropped her head in her hands.

Up in the Private Ward, Margie Trimmings paced up and down the Ward kitchen, whilst her junior eyed her apprehensively; she was used to this mood, she called it 'Trimmins' Tiger Mood'. She paced up and down and frowned into her cup of cocoa and was a perfect beast all the night. She wondered what had put Trimmings into her tiger mood. Margie ignored her. She was smarting under the treatment she had received from that fiancé of the Leftcart-Spratling. She wondered if they had bluffed her. Well, she could afford to wait. Or could she? She'd need all the money she could lay her hands on if Ada was wrong and that stuff she had recommended wasn't any good. Blast! Just as she had got that Society trollop just where she wanted her! She was on the verge of coughing-up. She was good for a darn sight more than twenty quid. You could have got a cool fifty from her. She went all of a heap when she found the cat was out of the bag. It must have been a bluff—all that 'we're going to get married' stuff. Blast! They'd put over a fast one. Though, if they were getting married, it certainly spoiled the story. Damn and blast! It was a nice easy way to get a drop of extra cash! She was certainly having a lot of bad luck; she had hooked Lutina Bell but Syd had made a fool of her and pinched the money, then, when she had got even with the Spratling girl, she got caught red-handed. She hated the words, she hated looking back on that money when they caught her in the act. They couldn't prove anything, and, anyway, she was fed up with Brantling, after all. She'd quit the hospital. It was going to be pretty boring being there all the coming summer. There were plenty of other places where she'd rather be. She could even get that London flat—just for week-ends, of course. Margie's eyes narrowed. Well, she hadn't exactly finished with Brantling yet. Not quite. There were Arthur Lane and Mike Mahoon. Arthur would be at the hospital for some time yet, there was not such a hurry to work on him. But Mike would be leaving soon. Mike had talked about Montevideo and let out all sorts of hints about nice dresses and good times. And he wasn't a bad sort.

Margie lit a cigarette and walked out to the corridor desk and sat there and smoked impudently. Her Junior gasped. What was the matter with Trimmings? She had lost her head or something! Even she never dared to smoke inside the hospital, even she, as a rule, went on to the balcony for a cigarette. And now, there she was, cool as you please, sitting at the desk, smoking as if she were in the Common Room; the Junior gasped. She gulped down her cocoa and went on an entirely unnecessary tour of the semi-private wards. Golly, she thought, Trimmings'll catch it if Sister comes round again suddenly. But, it seemed, Trimmings did not care, tonight. She was still smoking when the Junior returned.

"You can have a snooze in Sister's Room," said Margie.

"Oh no—why don't you, Nurse?" the Junior began, for, as a rule, Margie went in there for a few minutes' curl-up with her shoes off before the next round made by the Night Sister.

"Oh, do as you're told!" snapped Margie, and hurriedly deciding that it was useless to argue with the tiger mood, the Junior quickly obeyed.

Margie lit another cigarette and waited until her Junior had settled down in the Sister's Room, then, resting the cigarette on the desk, she took out a small mirror and a lip-stick that she had secreted in the desk

and carefully made up her face. She surveyed herself critically, and smiled at her reflection. Yes, she was an attractive piece, all right. She could do all right for herself in Montevideo. Lots of nice clothes supplied by Mike. H'm! Yes, she could do very nicely, thank you. And Mike wasn't so bad, really. You could tolerate him, if you had to. He wasn't such a bad sort. . . . Quietly she got up and made her way quickly down the corridor to Room Three.

In her excitement she forgot the cigarette that she had left burning on the desk edge.

She quietly opened the door of Room Three, and, without switching up the light, she went over to the bed and peered down at Mike. He was fast asleep, and his mouth was wide open. She wrinkled her nose at the sight of him. For a moment she hesitated, but, as if picturing herself basking in the sun in the South of France, she seemed to make up her mind and, bending over him, she tickled his ear. Mike moved about uneasily, and then blinked.

"Hollo!" Margie whispered.

"Oh, hallo, Babe," murmured Mike, sleepily, and grunted: "I wondered when you were gonna come and see your sweetie," he said.

"Sh!" cautioned Margie as she tiptoed to the door and locked it.

Her cigarette, burning low, slipped from the desk in the hall into the waste-paper basket and slowly ignited a discarded medical temperature chart.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

DUFFY AWOKE WITH A CHOKING FEELING IN HIS THROAT. THERE WAS a strong acrid smell and a thick pall of smoke over the ward. It was stifling hot, and he felt deeply oppressed. He had, in the past, been in a similar situation in Shanghai when as a war correspondent for a group of Canadian newspapers, he had covered the '32 Sino-Japanese war. For a moment he imagined that he was dreaming about this experience. There were people coughing about him just as there had been then. But there were no bangs—and there had been bangs in plenty that night in the Soochow area, when they had been suddenly bombed.

Duffy sat up in bed and tried to recollect the lay-out of the room. There were two other fellows from American papers sharing it with him, and the windows—he turned as if towards the windows of that small Chinese hotel, only to find that he was looking at the half-open door of the Brantling Ward; it was blazing furiously. In the next bed to him, Mr. Beach was coughing violently with long retching gasps. Duffy jumped out of bed, forgetting his bad foot, and, falling violently on it, buckled it up under him and sat in a heap on the floor. The sharp sudden pain stabbed through him for a moment as he lay there, and, finding he was not able to move, he shouted for help.

In the corridor the desk and that section of the passage was ablaze. Flames had embraced the doorway of Sister's Room and Room One, and passed on to Private Room Number Two, which Lutina Bell had vacated. Asleep in Sister's Room, the Junior Probationer had become

stifled by the fumes and fallen unconscious, oblivious of the danger. Now, Duffy's shouts had awakened Mr. Gidney in Room Number One. He had heard, as he dozed, what had sounded like the cracking of sticks, and now, immediately awake, he switched on the bed-lamp to discover that the fire blazed with fierce intensity across the door—his only way of escape. Now from outside there were more shouts and screams, and from Room Four, where she had, too, fallen asleep, Margie Trimmings had rushed out to find a complete curtain of fire across the passage, blocking her way back to the desk. The flames, with passionate intensity, caressed the walls of the corridor, licking at the door of Room Two and extending along the carpet, creeping forward towards Room Three, where she had been with Mike. Somehow, in some way, she had become cut off by the fire which was moving slowly towards them; just what had happened to her assistant, just how the fire had started, she did not know or care, the only thought in Margie Trimmings' terrified mind was "If they find I am cut off they'll want to know why I was down in this part of the wing. I couldn't be doing dressings and not have been awake. I must have been asleep down in this wing. Oh my God—I've got to get through the flames back to the other side, but I can't, I daren't. I'll be burnt. Oh, my God!" She stood as if fascinated by the flames, unable to move, to make the decision that would carry her through them.

The cries and shouts had grown in number and volume, and there was also the sound of people running along the corridor from the direction of the lift. Duffy, now back on his bed, was issuing instructions to the three men in his room; Mr. Beach had managed to get to the open window, and shouted lustily for help. The young boy and the other occupant were busy attempting to quench the flames with a series of jugs of water from the basin installed in the ward. It was a gallant but quite ineffective attempt; the fire was, at that particular place, too strong to be controlled by such minor methods. But, by now, help was on its way.

One person had been awake throughout the gradual kindling of the fire, Mrs. Draybridge; though, being farther down the passage, in Room Four, she could not be absolutely sure that she could smell burning. She had, as she lay in a torment now stilled by exhaustion, heard Margie Trimmings enter Mike's room, Room Three next to her, but had not heard the nurse come out again. She had heard a faint, peculiar sound of sibilant cracking, of a faint roaring, rather like a distant water-fall, and then, suddenly, Mrs. Draybridge had felt, in her mind, there is a fire! There is a fire going on somewhere. Somewhere near. But she could not be sure, and she did not want to alarm anyone, and, for herself, she did not care.

Then there had been shouts, and she realized that the fire was in that very corridor, the fire was practically outside her room. She heard the nurse run out of Room Four and hesitate in the corridor. She heard the confused sounds of panic, commands and shrill cries. She heard the sudden hiss of water on flames, the crackling of blistered wood-work, the ominous gathering undercurrent of sound of approaching flame, but she was not afraid. This, thought Mrs. Draybridge, is God's answer. I am going to die. There is nothing to live for and He has at last answered my prayers. She was not frightened, nor was she thinking of pain. Just how she would die did not worry her. She lay there, hearing but not listening to the sounds that grew tumultuous about her. It was to be so. She had prayed that it would be so, and it was

to be. Edward had called to see her and she had made one desperate bid to get him back, but it was not to be. Now all she wanted was a way out. God had given this to her.

In the corridor, Miranda had rushed out and joined Margie Trimmings, and they watched the flames that separated them from the other part of the wing. Miranda heard piteous shouts from Room Three. Mike had lost his nerve. He was unable to get out of bed, and he had been left. He yelled like a baby. Margie Trimmings seemed stunned. Miranda turned to her and asked: "Isn't there an emergency way out—by the balcony?"

"Yes," said Margie in a daze. "If I go down that way they'll know I was asleep in this part of the wing," she was thinking.

"Come on, come on!" shouted Miranda, shaking her. "Who have we got to get out?" she asked.

"Him!" Margie pointed into Mike's room. "And Mrs. Draybridge and Spratling—no, she's left—er—Arthur Lane in Seven—perhaps we'd better get through this way——" Margie said, pointing to the barrage of flame up the passage.

"What? What for? Are you mad? Quick—get him out in there—I'll see if Number Seven's all right." Miranda rushed down the corridor and found that Arthur had nearly reached the door of his room, but had, in the effort, fainted.

By now, people were running up the emergency stairway.

Mr. Gidney stood looking at the square of fire which framed the doorway of his room. There were some people attempting to quell it, but the flames kept them back. At the windows they were busy setting up long ladders, and he knew that it would be all right. But he was thinking of Mrs. Draybridge. Had the fire reached her? Was she safe? It was no good standing there awaiting salvation. He had to act. He quickly soaked his pyjamas in water, and with trembling fingers tied a damp handkerchief across his mouth, and, with a quick intake of breath that reminded him forcibly of his Nephrectomy, made a dive through the flames. Turned right along the corridor past Room Two and through the flames that were advancing on to Room Three. His feet were badly burned, but he had succeeded in getting through without other injury except for a small facial burn. Mrs. Draybridge was safe! The fire had not reached her. He passed Margie Trimmings trying to get Mike Mahoon out into the passage from Room Three, and, as he entered Room Four, he saw, at the end of the passage, that rescuers had come in from the balcony, and, with Miranda Stewart, were carrying out the prostrate form of Arthur Lane.

Mrs. Draybridge lay there, quietly looking up at the ceiling. She had a faint smile on her face as if she were amused by the sudden chaos. Mr. Gidney gasped and rushed up to her, calling out: "Mrs. Draybridge, quick! Quick!" She turned to him in surprise.

"Quick! For God's sake hurry. Do hurry!" he shouted. He had grabbed her and was attempting to haul her out of the bed.

"No—I'm staying. I don't care—no!" she pleaded with him.

"I implore you, please, hurry! Quick! There's no time to lose," Mr. Gidney urged. The handkerchief had slipped down from his mouth and it hung limply around his neck. She noticed that he was soaked. Ludicrous though he looked, there was tremendous urgency in his movements, and he pleaded with her with a fierce assertion: "You've got to. You've got to! Come on!" he said.

"No—please leave me, I'm all right. It's best that I stay—it's

what I have prayed for," said Ethel Draybridge. Mr. Gidney stopped still as if he had received a sudden welt across the face. He stood there realizing all she meant by this, and he swayed for a moment as if wavering, as if, perhaps, it was best that, if she wanted to be like this, who was he to try and alter her destiny? Then, as if in a fury at his own weakness in even a few moments' doubt, he was, in spite of his own ailment, pulling at Mrs. Draybridge and shouting fiercely: "No—I won't have it—you've got to live. You've got to live!"

"No. Why? I've nothing to live for. I have nobody—it's for the best," said Mrs. Draybridge.

"I won't let you," he said; "I want you to live . . ." he continued, his voice breaking with emotion. "Please make the effort. You can. I know you can—you're not alone!" And, looking suddenly at him, in that strange atmosphere of panic outside and around her and complete tranquillity within, the tranquillity of despair, Ethel Draybridge realized that, indeed, she was not alone—that it was not meant that she should die, but that God had answered her prayers. Not quite in the way she had anticipated. He had given her someone who wanted desperately that she should live. He had sent her a man who thought that she, Ethel Draybridge, was one whom he respected and needed and loved. She realized that this good-natured, eager-faced, middle-aged man who implored her to live was her answer. Yes; she wanted to live just as he wanted her to. No sudden picture of all she loved passed before her eyes; no terrific urge to live; no passing pageant or, as one hears, no quick scenes of her past floated before her eyes, but suddenly a quick mental visualization of them together, walking in a garden. Not any particular garden. Certainly none that she had ever known. Not Worthing or Gethsemane, but a garden, together. It was only a fleeting moment that she had seen that picture, but it seemed to depict all that they would mean to one another. He still stood there imploringly, and perhaps only a second or two had, in reality, passed, but in that eternity to her, she knew that she was loved and wanted once more, and that now, suddenly, desperately, mattered to her. She was going to get well and never be alone again, and, quite simply, she said: "Yes, we must get out of here."

The tears suddenly coursed down his face; together there, they were in spirit as strong as lions. He helped her quickly towards the door. "You know," she said in a voice that had lost its monotony, in a voice that held an exultant note, "You know, I'm going to get well!"

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

AS MIRANDA DRAGGED ARTHUR TOWARDS THE BALCONY, RESCUERS entered from the balcony door; quickly some of them helped her to get him out whilst others ran along towards Margie and Mike, who was still shouting childishly. Mr. Gidney appeared at the doorway of Room Four assisting Mrs. Draybridge; they walked erect and were smiling serenely as if they were strolling along a country lane. On the other side of the fire some of the hospital staff had succeeded in forcing their way into Sister's Room and rescuing Margie's Junior Probationer

The patients were taken down into the Public Wards, to the excitement of the occupants, who had, those who were able, watched the rescue work from their windows. The local brigade soon had the fire under control. Arthur and Duffy, side by side in the men's ward, sipping hot soup, were quite content; after an examination, both of them were told they would have a little longer at Brantling in order to put right the new complications that had occurred due to the sudden strain put on their legs in attempting to escape from the fire. Neither of them minded. Arthur was in a detached frame of mind now, a few months before he would have cynically cursed his bad luck; today he merely raised an eyebrow querulously and sipped Scotch broth. Duffy was quite delighted; the sooner he was well, the sooner he had to report back to the *Gazette*—and, as far as Duffy was concerned, the *Gazette* could wait. Mike had made such a fuss and talked incessantly about his nerves being 'all shot to hell', that they finally gave him a sedative to keep him quiet.

In the Women's Ward, Miranda, propped up in bed drinking tea, too excited to sleep, re-lived the few moments of sudden activity upstairs; her only wish, that the position had been such that she had rescued Tommie Graves. Mrs. Draybridge lay in a nearby bed, and, visiting her, a dressing now on the burn on his face, sat Mr. Gidney. They sat silently, holding each other's hand, and looking at one another, their eyes happily speaking volumes.

In the Nurses' House in the Brantling Hospital grounds, once the girls had been quietened and after Margie had told and re-told her experiences of the fire, Margie was quietly packing a suitcase. There had been no awkward questions yet, but there would be, later in the morning. She'd had enough of Brantling. She'd only be sacked, anyway. She had racked her brains for a suitable excuse, but she could think of none. They'd put the squeak in for her at other hospitals if she stayed and faced the music; and, anyway she was fed up with nursing for a spell. She'd got Master Mike Mahoon where she wanted him, and she'd be able to settle down to a very pleasant holiday at his expense. Just as soon as Mike was better, it had been agreed that he should collect her and off they'd go. Mike was crazy about her. Well, a good job too. Mike could give her a good time, and that, after all, was all that mattered. And for the present, for the few more weeks before Mike was ready for that vacation, little Margie would take that flat in London; why not, a girl had to look after herself these days, otherwise it was all take and no give. Margie hurriedly packed, and when all was quiet, she crept out of her small room and sneaked off to Brantling station.

In Mrs. Durkin's bare room, the alarum clock that she hated so much went off, stridently urging her to get up and go to work.

"Oh, drat!" muttered Mrs. Durkin. She was having such a wonderful dream. She and Lutina Bell, the film star, were at Buckingham Palace, and the man who had run her down was showing them round the place, and the guests at Mon Repos were dressed in knee-breeches and wore diamonds and orders and turbans. And it was all very bright. Mrs. Durkin sniffed in disgust. Quickly she felt for the alarum clock and gave the top of it a good bang, pressing down the alarum connector and so stopping the ringing; she considered it bad luck if she did not stop the bell before it had completely run down. Then, according to

her ritual, she went about the business of getting up—hurriedly dipping her hands into the enamelled basin, sluicing her face, dressing, then, opening the window slightly, and finally spreading the dripping on a large chunk of bread while the kettle was boiling for her cup of tea. Soon she was on her way to the Mon Repos. Grumbling and half talking to herself, she half-ran, half-walked towards the sea-front. She'd had a wonderful time at the hospital and now, after a quick period of heaven, she was going back to the hell of everyday drudgery. It made you fair sick. She wished she could have stayed at the hospital for the rest of her days; she really had enjoyed it, nothing to do but stretch out your tired old limbs and close your weary old eyes and sigh peacefully. Perhaps a nice drop of sleep, and, when you woke up, clean-faced nurses to wait on you and wash you and give you a nice meal. It was all right, a bit of real all right. And, in reflective mood, cursing her luck, knowing that they'd tease her at the Mon Repos, knowing that she had to go back to the old life, that in her tired old heart was bitter discontent, Mrs. Durkin reached the road she had attempted to cross when Arthur had knocked her down. Well, well . . . she never would have thought that she would be grateful to anyone for knocking her down, but she had been—oh, Lordie, yes! It had been grand. As she sighed, Mrs. Durkin looked first one way, then another, to make sure that the road was clear, and, seeing that it was, stepped off the pavement and began to cross. Suddenly she stopped, made up her mind, and then retraced her footsteps to the pavement. A daring scheme had presented itself to her. She stood there, shivering, slightly due to the early morning chill and her own excitement, and she waited.

She waited a considerable time, for there was practically no traffic on the road at that hour of the morning. A solitary milk-cart rumbled by, and she would be very late for her work at the Mon Repos. And then, at last, coming slowly along from the direction of the sea-front, rumbled a large petrol lorry. Mrs. Durkin waited with bated breath, her eyes screwed up to watch the approaching lorry. The driver, not long up, sleepy-eyed, yawned as he made for London. He planned to pull up at a little café he frequented further out of Brantling, where he could get a good cup of tea with sausages and chips, and he was anticipating this, when, almost under his wheels, he saw a little old woman dart across the road. He pulled the steering wheel round and jammed on his brakes, and, with a strident screech, the lorry swerved sideways across the road.

They brought Mrs. Durkin into the hospital and took her straight to the Casualty Ward. They summoned the Resident Surgeon and he operated at once. The old girl was in a pretty bad way. He did what he could for her. The lorry driver was cut about the face a bit, and was deeply concerned at the accident. He kept reaffirming: "Ran out deliberately—right in front of my lorry—didn't give me no chance," he said. The Resident Surgeon ordered a quarter of morphia and a hundredth of atropine for Mrs. Durkin, nodded to the night staff and made his way back to his room. He hated doing emergency jobs, but he never let himself down, he always did a good job—got interested at once—if he had to operate. And his early-morning bad temper only reappeared when he went back to bed again. These confounded casualties always came in whenever he wanted a good rest; always when he had a golf date with Ted Black, and he needed all the sleep he could get to give Ted a good game

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

THE DAY STAFF, WHO HAD HAD VERY LITTLE SLEEP, CAME ON DUTY TO the Public Wards where all the patients from the Private Wards were now housed. The fire had been the sole topic of conversation over breakfast, but now, as they overlapped the night staff, standing chattering in groups about the Large Ward Kitchen, Nurse Morgan came running in with the news of Margie Trimmings' disappearance. It had at first been thought, Morgan explained with some relish, and a certain amount of awe, that Margie had perished in the fire—until it was definitely established that she had been seen downstairs in the Public Wards, and, later, by one of the other night nurses, as she left with her suitcase at dawn for destinations unknown. There was a considerable amount of speculation as to Margie's whereabouts, her possible intentions, her probable motives; the nurses knew Margie Trimmings rather well. Already, before the night staff had gone off duty for the day, the hospital's first visitor arrived. A hatless, breathless Tommie Graves, who had seen the early morning papers and had hurried up demanding an interview with Miranda Stewart—rules or no rules. There had been a fire, and he had every intention of seeing she was all right, and damn the Official Visiting Hours.

His worried face and his determination amused Sister, who had already assured him that Miranda was perfectly all right; that there had been no casualties and that he could see her a little later in the day. That was not good enough for Tommie, and he said so. Sister smiled, and took him in to see Miranda. He could only gasp when he saw her; she looked, due chiefly to the terrifying pictures he had built up in his mind as to her possible injury, very lovely, lying there, glancing at one of the picture papers. She seemed to sense his presence, for she glanced up quickly as he came towards her.

There was no need for them to express pleasure at that moment; they both knew it to be there, and all unsaid things were, in reality, being said, if not aloud, then, in their minds. Miranda was safe! As she looked back at him, she remembered something, and, quickly slipping her hand under her pillow, she brought out a cablegram.

"Arrived this morning," she said.

"From Canada?" he asked, though why he should have known it was from Canada he could not say. Miranda just nodded. He was reluctant to look at it. Somehow he had always felt that she would never go to Canada, somehow in his heart he knew that she and he were bound up in the future. That he would achieve success with her by his side to help and spur him on to greater effort. And now, suddenly—Canada. He took the cablegram and read: *Darling what can I say stop am in love someone else and would like my freedom anxious make all amends would not hurt hair of your head stop can you forgive me?*

Tommie looked up quickly to find Miranda smiling at him.

"There must be," she said, "someone taking an awfully big interest in us!"

Singing brightly, Nurse Morgan, carrying a tray of tea, came into the men's ward, followed by some of the day staff, including Lily Fraser, and she, being one of the regular day nurses in that section of the hospital, was now in charge of the others who had come in to attend to the Private Ward patients, temporarily housed in the big wards.

In the corner, Duffy groaned: "Must we have the hymnal so early in the morning?" and turned over on his back and looked up into the smiling face of Lily Fraser.

"Aha! I think," he said, "I'm in Hollywood!"

"Well! You promised to visit me," she said, "but I didn't expect you'd come and stay here!"

"Blame your irresistible charm," Duffy replied.

Over by the door stood Ella and Evelyn Charteris. "Now's your chance," whispered Ella Logan to Evelyn. "Here! Take him his tea!" she said excitedly, she wanted Evelyn to enjoy herself; she was awfully kind, was Ella, with her 'kiddie' and her sweet, ready smile.

"What chance?" Evelyn asked.

"Arthur Lane! Now that Margie's not here. . . ." Ella began. Evelyn blushed. "I think you are all up the pole," she said.

"Go on. I know he likes you," said Ella.

"Don't talk rot." Evelyn replied, and turned to give the mug of tea to Nurse Jenkins. Ella stopped her. "Oh no, you don't!" she said. "Go on, now!"

Evelyn took the mug of tea over to Arthur. He took some waking, for he had not slept much until dawn. There were two fascinating lines between his eyebrows, and his eyelashes were dark and thick as they lay in semicircles on his cheeks; there was just the hint of one eyebrow cocked higher than the other, as if a cynical dream was passing through his sleep. He was so good-looking and, even unshaven, he was nice and clean. As she placed the tea on the table near him Evelyn shook him softly. "Good morning," she said. He opened his eyes and smiled slowly.

"Would you," he asked lazily, "be interested in a contract whereby you did that for the next ten years?"

Evelyn looked surprised. "I don't understand."

"I can't think of anything I'd like more," Arthur explained, "than for you to wake me with tea in the morning—so, at a modest salary, say thirty quid a week, whether in China or Peru, all you have to do is bring in my morning tea—will you accept?"

"You're delirious—it must be because of the fire," said Evelyn.

"Of course, you've got lots of time to think about it," Arthur added.

"I shan't be leaving the hospital for some while yet——"

"I'll think about it!" promised Evelyn.

In the Women's Ward, Lily Fraser, going the rounds, stepped behind the screen that Brantling placed around any patient in a Public Ward who had just had an operation, and studied the report above the bed. The name seemed familiar, and she turned and looked down at Mrs. Durkin. She started. It was the same old charlady! Nurse Fraser turned and found that the Day Sister had joined her by the bedside.

"Sister—it's the same old lady," she began. Sister nodded. "I know. And the irony is that she's come back here the same way——"

"What—run over by a car?"

"Yes. A lorry. The driver's in for minor cuts and abrasions, swears she did it purposely."

"She must be blind as a bat, Sister."

"Well, she looks quite pleased with herself," Sister remarked.

"There's no hope, is there?" Nurse Fraser asked.

"No, I'm afraid not. She got hit properly this time."

Then, as they looked down at Mrs. Durkin, the tired old eyelids flickered and finally forced themselves back. Her watery old eyes peered at them, weakly trying to focus them. They were nurses, all right. Yes, she was in paradise. She murmured something, and they bent down to hear what she said. Nurse Fraser took hold of her hand.

"Those—those lovely flowers," she muttered weakly. There were no flowers. Sister looked up at Nurse Fraser, who replied: "Yes, aren't they beautiful?" Mrs. Durkin nodded. She thought for a moment and tried to speak again. She made signs for Lily Fraser to get closer to her. Nurse Fraser bent low over the prostrate old body. "What, dear?" she asked. Mrs. Durkin tried once more. She framed the words, but no sound came out. And then, as if by sheer will-power, determined to have her say, she grabbed Nurse Fraser tightly by the arm and whispered: "'Oo? 'Oo sent them?"

Nurse Fraser thought quickly; her eyes brightened, she said quite firmly: "They're from Miss Bell—Lutina Bell!"

A great and wonderful smile lit up the face of Mrs. Durkin; she nodded as if she had known the answer all the time. The smile did not die; but Mrs. Durkin did, at that very moment, and in great happiness.

"You'll need a Death card," said Sister, matter-of-factly. Discipline. Callous old witch! thought Lily Fraser, but she had not seen the expression on the Sister's face as she turned away.

In the first big ward, Daphne Short sighed, gripped her little white enamelled tray, and began her rounds. There was, she reasoned with herself, only one way to reconcile herself to this awful morning ritual that she hated, and that was to tell herself that every morning meant one less time she would have to make the rounds.

At that moment Matron appeared like visiting Royalty, with the Day Sister and her assistant hovering just a few inches behind Matron ready to explain, agree or alibi, whatever the need might be. Daphne Short gripped her tray more firmly still. By golly—the Matron really looked fine. What a wonderful face! She reminded Daphne of Edith Cavell, Florence Nightingale and Greer Garson all rolled into one. There was a woman who had a *niche* in life; a woman who was doing something worth while. Daphne Short's lips tightened with determination. No doubt about it, Matron, too, had had to suffer. Had had to work hard, do unpleasant tasks in order to become head of Brantling. It made you realize things were worth while. The Matron and her colleagues swept towards her. Matron said, "Good morning," as Daphne Short stood respectfully—awaiting their passing. Daphne hadn't time to reply, for Matron had gone by and it was too late. With head held high, Daphne knew that any sacrifice was worth while. She set down her tray and picked up a pencil from it and the charts.

"Good morning," she said. "Have you had a motion this morning?"

Drowning the patient's reply came the sound of Nurse Morgan's voice, as she entered the ward. "Dawn on our darkness and lend us Thine aid," she sang cheerfully, requiring, it seemed, no aid whatsoever. For the first time since she had been at Brantling, Junior Probationer Daphne Short felt like joining in.

At the other end of the ward a patient groaned, whether in pain or musical protest at Nurse Morgan's vocal efforts it cannot be ascertained.

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You get as good value as if you took in a film-fan weekly for a whole year.—HOWARD SPRING in the *Daily Mail*.

Here, as in his many novels, he comments wisely and wittily on men and affairs, and also women . . . gay and gossipy pages . . . a delightful line of wisecracks . . . all entertaining stuff . . . the numerous photographs, among the best of their kind, add to the fun of the record.—*Cavalcade*.

An agreeably honest success story. Some six hundred stage and film names bob in and out of this book.—*Star*.

This young man is a versatile person who has seen life from many angles and believes in living it to the full. . . . His illustrated autobiography is a graphic piece of writing, never dull, full of human interests . . . many sided in its appeal. . . .—Professor MAURICE RELTON in the *Church of England Newspaper*.

Readers who enjoyed this Author's popular and amusing novels will thoroughly enjoy this gay autobiography. . . . Carstairs' keen sense of humour never fails to interest and amuse his readers.—*The Queen*.

Very readable and film fans will adore it.—*Sheffield Telegraph*.

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The book is packed with famous names of the screen, amusing disclosures and stories, and if only because of its stout-heartedness and unspoiled spirit should surely parallel in sales his fictional best sellers.—*Reading Standard*.

. . . Engaging frankness. . . . There is a great deal of fun about Hollywood. The book gives a vivid picture of it.—*Reynolds News*.

. . . Star studded autobiography . . . A vigorous young man with a smooth line in wisecracks, on first-name terms with almost every star in London and Hollywood . . . amusing reading.—*News Review*, London.

This gay autobiography . . . his sense of fun never deserts him.—*Manchester Evening News*.

To those readers who seek something 'different' we heartily recommend this light-hearted autobiography, in which the author's irresistible sense of humour is ever to the fore.—*Burton Daily Mail*.

